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THE HEART OF JADE

By the Same Author .

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

HERNAN CORTÉS

ENGLISHMEN, FRENCHMEN, SPANIARDS

THE WORLD'S DESIGN

ELYSIAN FIELDS

ANARCHY OR HIERARCHY

THEORY AND PRACTICE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

DISARMAMENT

I AMERICANS

DON QUIXOTE : AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY IN PSYCHOLOGY

THE GENIUS OF SPAIN

SHELLEY AND CALDERON

SPANISH FOLK SONGS

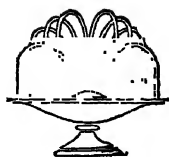
THE SACRED GIRAFFE

SIR BOB

THE HEART OF JADE

A Novel

BY
SALVADOR DE MADARIAGA



Collins

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1944

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LIST OF CHARACTERS

*Those with a * are historical*

- *NEZAWAL PILLI, King of Tetzcuco.
- *FRUITY NIPPLE, his Queen.
- XUCHITL, his daughter.
- THREE-REEDS (Yeicatl), his chief steward.
- IXCAWATZIN, his nephew.
- LONG FACE (Ixtlicoyu), one of his oarsmen.
- *MOTECZUMA, Emperor of Mexico.
- *CUTTLAHUAC, his brother.
- A SORCERER (or tonalpouhque).
- CITLALI (or Star), Longface's wife.
- WART (or Tzocaca), a tavern keeper.
- MOLE (or Tozan), a merchant of the lower class and a spy.
- A SOLDIER. SEVERAL PRIESTS.

- DON RODRIGO MANRIQUE, Lord of Torremala.
- ALONSO, his son.
- SUAREZ, his steward.
- DOÑA ISABEL MANRIQUE, formerly Salomé ha-Levy, his wife.
- SAMUEL HA-LEVY, rabbi of Torremala, her father.
- FATHER GUZMÁN, Prior of the Monastery of El Cerro del Moro.
- ESQUIVEL, a converted Jew.
- SUSANA, his wife.
- ISAAC AVANEL, a JEWISH MONEYLENDER.
- *CRISTOBAL COLON, an adventurer, later, the Discoverer of America.
- FERNAN DE ZAMORA, the doctor of Torremala.
- ZACCHARIAS JAHUDA, another Jewish moneylender.
- DAVID HA-LEVY, a wealthy Jew, brother of the rabbi.
- CALERO, the fool of Torremala.

- *CACAMA
- *VANILLA-FACE
- *COHUANACOH
- FIREBIRD, their tutor.
- *QUEEN WOMB-OF-JADE (Chalchiuitnenetl).
- SHADOW, Citlali's sister.
- SPARROW (Quachichitl), her infant son.

PALM (Tsoyatl), her husband.

A PRIEST OF THE TLALOCS, gods of rain.

ANTONIO BERMUDEZ, a page of Cristóbal Colón.

LEONOR, a Moorish slave.

DOÑA MENCIA, mother of Don Rodrigo Manrique.

VICENTE ESQUIVEL, } son and daughter of the armour smith, Esquivel.
MARTA ESQUIVEL, }

*HERNÁN CORTÉS, a young hidalgo, later Conqueror of Mexico.

FATHER FREDERICK, a monk at the Monastery on the Hill of the Moor, later the Prior.

A MOORISH FALCONER.

HUSSEIN BEN RAMAN, a Moorish Knight born in Spain.

A MOORISH GARDENER, in the service of Don Rodrigo Manrique.

MAXTLA, a young slave.

THE CHIEF PRIEST OF THE CALMEGAC.

THE FATHER PROVINCIAL of the Jeromite Order.

"THE BOAR," Dean of the Seminary of St. John the Baptist.

FATHER XAVIER, Rector of the Seminary of St. John the Baptist.

JULIAN, fellow novice of Alonso in the Seminary.

THE HOSTESS, at the inn in Toledo.

*CARDINAL XIMENEZ DE CISNEROS.

*MIGUEL DE PASSAMONTE, the King's Treasurer at Santo Domingo.

MARIONEX, cacique of an Indian village.

EGUILAZ, a Spanish settler in the Indies.

NUÑO QUINTERO, a sailor.

TAITLA, a Totonac girl.

OCUTLI, Chief of a Totonac settlement.

CHICOATL, Chief of another Totonac settlement.

THREE TAX-GATHERERS (calpixques of Moteczuma).

A MEXICAN ARTIST COURIER.

MACUIMALINAL, Xuchitl's husband, brother of Moteczuma.

*PAPAN, Moteczuma's sister.

PETALCALCATL, Moteczuma's Chief Steward.

OLAYETL, chief of the northern Otomies.

TECUTLATO, chief priest of the northern Otomies.

LOTL, chief of the southern Otomies.

TLALI, an Otomi girl.

ICNIUHYOTL, another Otomi girl.

THE PRIESTS OF YOCIPA.

- *JUAN DIAZ, a Spanish priest in Cortés' Army.
- *FATHER OLMEDO, a Spanish friar in Cortés' Army.
- *DOÑA MARINA, Cortés' native mistress and interpreter.
- *QUINTALBOR, Ambassador of Moteczuma.
- *CUITALPITOC, a slave.
- *FRANCISCO DE MONTEJO, a captain in Cortés' Army.
- *GONZALO DE SANDOVAL, a captain in Cortés' Army.
- *JUAN VELAZQUEZ DE LEON, a captain in Cortés' Army.
- *ANDRES DE TAPIA, a captain in Cortés' Army.
- *ALONSO PUERTOCARRERO, a captain in Cortés' Army.
- *ALVARADO, a captain in Cortés' Army.
- *THE FAT CACIQUE OF CEMPOAL.
- *PEDRO GALLEG0, a soldier in Cortés' Army.
- *JUAN DE HERRERA, a soldier in Cortés' Army.
- VICENTE ESQUIVEL, a soldier in Cortés' Army.
- THE BLACK MAGICIANS.
- THE GREY MAGICIANS.
- *THE SERPENT-WOMAN, Captain General of the Mexican Army.
- OPEN-WOUND, Second in Command to Ixcawatzin.
- *CHICHIMECATECÜHTLI, Tlaxcatec war-chief.
- *XICOTENCATL THE OLD, speaker (tlatoani) in the Tlaxcatec Council.
- *MAXISCATZIN, speaker (tlatoani) in the Tlaxcatec Council.
- *THEOHUAYACATZIN, speaker (tlatoani) in the Tlaxcatec Council.
- *XICOTENCATL THE YOUNG, Commander in Chief of Tlaxcala.

THE DIVINE YOUTH.

- *YAÑEZ, carpenter in Cortés' Army.
- NAVALLI, Moteczuma's familiar witch.
- CALCITETL, builder of Axayacatl's Palace.
- *CUAUHTEMOC, nephew of Moteczuma.
- *ORTEGA, page of Cortés'.
- *QUAUHPOPOCA, governor of the northern coast.
- RAMIREZ, a Spanish soldier.
- *MEXIA, the King's Treasurer in Cortés' Army.

VIXTOCIOATL, ATLATOUAN, XOCHILQUETZATL, XILOMEN,	}	brides of Ixcawatzin.
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- *PANFILO DE NARVAEZ.
- *DOÑA ELVIRA.
- *JUAN DE SALAMANCA, a soldier in Cortés' Army.

MULEY, a pirate.

FATIMA, his chief wife.

DOÑA LAURA DE AGUILAR,

AMALIA RODRIGUEZ,

VIOLANTE XEREZ,

} women of Muley's harem.

CASILDA, wife of Suárez.

CATALINA, daughter of Suárez.

THE LICENCIATE GARCIA, chief clerk of the Inquisition Office in Seville.

FATHER THEODORE, a friar,

FATHER MIGUEL, a friar,

} Inquisitors.

*DON ALONSO MANRIQUE, Bishop of Córdoba.

*DON RODRIGO MANRIQUE, his son and one of his chaplains.

RODRIGO MANRIQUE, son of Alonso and Xuchitl.

Hens were unknown in the American continent till the discovery and conquest. But the Spaniards did not know the turkey, which they found in Mexico, and they called it hen. To avoid the anachronism implied in the word turkey, the word hen has been used in this sense throughout the book.

Book One

THE GHOSTS

PART I

KING NEZAWAL PILLI HAS A DAUGHTER

I

WHEN King Nezawal Pilli was told that his wife Xocotzincatzin or Fruity Nipple had given him a daughter, the well-trained muscles of his face did not betray by the slightest movement the deep joy which he felt in his heart. This was not due to any lack of sons and daughters, for by his other wife, Fruity Nipple's elder sister, as well as by the forty odd women out of his two thousand concubines, whom he frequented, Nezawal Pilli had already over a hundred children—a crowd of royalty which he could hardly tell from the rest of his subjects. Fruity Nipple, however, was not merely one of his true wives, daughters of Tizoc, Emperor of Mexico ; she was also the only woman he had loved, and this daughter was the fruit of that love which for the first time after over forty years of war and women, had stirred his wise soul to the depths.

His first impulse was not to go and see the mother and child but to consult the stars, in order to find out how they would be disposed towards the new soul starting on her pilgrimage in this dark and muddy planet. King Nezawal Pilli was a keen student of astrology, and even the chief priests, rulers of the astrological—as opposed to the civic—calendar of the Aztec people held his science in great respect, while his familiarity with the deeper mysteries had won for him a reputation for magic and sorcery abhorrent to his rationalistic mind ; so that this, the most human of Aztec princes, passed for being able to incarnate at will in the body of a tiger, a lion or an eagle.

Aztec astrology was a complicated science for, after consulting the stars, it was still necessary to adjust whatever advice they had been good enough to impart to the no less complex and mysterious influences of the year-sign and of the sign of the magic calendar month under which the new human being had landed on this earth. The King's daughter was born in 1500, a year known to the Aztecs as 3-Knives. This sign was none too reassuring, for "knives" was related to the north, whence enemies generally descended upon the kingdom ; and

it was associated with the red colour, with blood and with the element of fire. The sign of the magic month was *Ceacatl*, or 1-Reeds, generally considered unfortunate in Mexican astrology, for it was a month subservient to the whims of Quetzalcoatl, the Winged Serpent, the god of the wind, and therefore all those born under this sign would be unlucky in their enterprises and the wind would blow away all they held dear. The King, however, knew that this evil trend of the Ceacatl month was not absolute and that some days in it counted as favourable enough for the priests to recommend that children born in any of the first six "houses" of the month should not be "baptised" or named till the seventh or, better still, the eighth, known as "Chicuexuchitl" or Eight Flowers. Now, it so happened that his daughter had been born on this very day which, moreover, under the civic calendar, happened to be the twentieth of the month, and therefore, was known as Xuchitl or Flower. The hint was too obvious to be passed over and King Nezawal Pilli gave orders to have the girl baptised that very day and named Xuchitl.

He was a mighty King and lived amid the splendors of a comfortable and luxurious palace in which a European potentate of his epoch would have missed no amenities save that of a good bed—for the Aztecs slept on the floor, on a mat softened by a few layers of cotton wraps—and would have found some new ones unknown in Europe such as excellent frothy cocoa, drunk cold for refreshment, and a deliciously exhilarating herb which the King used to smoke through elegant tubes made of amber and his subjects through humbler tubes made of reed. The Aztecs called this herb *yell*, and we have misnamed it tobacco, which was the name the Antillian islanders gave to the reed pipes with which they smoked it. King Nezawal Pilli threw his acayatl or cigar on the ashes of an incense burner before leaving his apartments for those of the Queen. He had to pass through many halls richly decorated with all kinds of real and imaginary animals, whose golden silhouettes caracoled on a background of shiny stucco. His feet, shod with golden-soled, green tiger-leather slippers trod lightly on floors of polished, decorated boards. As he approached the Queen's apartments, he had to cut his way through waves of women—mostly his own concubines, many also his daughters or concubines of his numerous sons—who flowed in and ebbed out, moved by both curiosity and tradition, to take a first glance at the new born baby; some had brought their children, having rubbed their knees with ashes to guard against the loosening of the joints which, as everybody knew, was sure to afflict any child who entered the room of a recently delivered mother without having taken such an obvious precaution.

Meanwhile, behind the thick curtain richly decorated with feather-work which separated the Queen's apartments from the crowded hall

outside, the *ticitl* or midwife was busy at work. She had just cut off from the crown of the new born child a tuft of hair which, in accordance with religious custom was to be kept aside till on the day of her death a similar lock of hair cut from the same place would be laid alongside it in a consecrated box, and both offered to the image of the departed after her body had been cremated on the funeral pyre. Once this far-sighted operation had been performed, the *ticitl* made ready to cut the child's navel cord. While the Queen, pale and happy, lay on her bed of cotton wraps, the midwife on her knees, sitting on her heels, held the tiny copper-coloured new-born doll in one hand and in the other she brandished a sharp obsidian knife. It was a magic, an almost religious operation, during which the midwife was required to recite an admonition to the child in words set down by tradition:

"Daughter of mine and my lady"—the midwife solemnly began, holding the black, shining blade in mid-air—"you have come to this world, a place of weariness, hardship and anguish in which it is cold and windy. Take notice, my daughter, that from the middle of your body"—and at this point the knife came down from mid-air and severed the cord—"I cut and hold your navel cord, for thus has it been ordained by your father and mother, Yoaltecutli, the Lord of the Night, and Yoalticiti, the Lady of the Night. You must always dwell within your home as the heart within the body; even as the ashes with which the fire is covered on the hearth; even as the trivet which supports the kitchen pot. Here, in this world, in which you are now being buried your work shall be to bring home water and to grind maize in the *metatl* . . ."—Fruity Nipple smiled faintly at this—" . . . and you must never stray away from the ashes and the hearth."

The midwife laid the infant by her mother. She had wrapt up the cord in a piece of white cotton cloth which she held in her hand, helpless, puzzled. The rite required that it should be buried close to the ashes and the hearth, so that the child, when grown up, should never stray from her home duties. This was easy enough in the usual Aztec house, built directly on the soil, but not in this palace where there was no hearth and the floors were of polished wood. With male infants, there was no difficulty; the cord was given to some captain who buried it in a battlefield, but with this girl . . . she glanced at the Queen who, indifferent to the problem, smiled at her infant. Still holding the bundle in her hand, the *ticitl* stepped out into the hall full of women, not knowing what to do, hoping to find some solution there. Profuse advice was poured on to her as soon as she appeared. "And above all, never let the fire out for a second during those first four days, for otherwise the new child's good luck would go out with the fire and never shine again."

"And the navel cord"—said an old, toothless woman, who still

lingered in the harem from the days of King Nezawal Coyotl—"don't forget the navel cord. It must be buried near the hearth, under the stone maize-grinder, or else she will never be a good decent stay-at-home wife."

"That is easily said"—retorted the old ticitl—"but where is the hearth in this beautiful house? Am I to go to the sculleries?"

The arrival of the King sent a murmur of excitement through the crowd. He sailed through the sea of women like one of his stately, carved and gilt canoes through the waters of the lake and disappeared behind the heavy curtain which protected the Queen's rest and privacy. There was a moment of silence. Most of those women, till then so vivacious, had been plunged back into intimate memories at the sight of their Lord. He was tall, well built and handsome, of a deep, reddish-brown complexion which at times seemed to be lit up from inside, and in his demeanour as well as in the clear-cut architecture of his features there was a suggestion of crystal-like rigidity both attractive in its beauty and forbidding in its unyielding perfection.

A maid appeared from behind the curtain and called the midwife back. "That must be about the baptism," ran the rumour. Presently, as if by magic, a name, *the name* began to flutter here and there in the crowd of women: *Xochitl! Xochitl!*—said and commented with their Mexican accent the concubines from the seven shores of the lake and from the island city of Mexico itself, while the native Tetzucan women, in their softer and, as they thought, more distinguished accent, repeated *Xuchitl! Xuchitl!*

Three boys arrived on the scene, three young sons of the King, or nephews—he could hardly tell which—clad in white cotton wraps. The women knew at once that the baptism or naming ceremony was to take place that very day and they all rushed out to the main court to secure a front seat.

It was one of the numerous courts of the royal palace, made of adobe walls set in a framework of granite carved into squat, weird shapes representing symbolic images of the gods. Twelve stone pillars on each side carried the upper gallery and provided a cool cloister round the yard paved with stone, in the centre of which a square basin received the water from a fountain which rose in the middle towards the sky in a thin transparent line. This royal basin was to stand for the earthenware bath in which humbler children were plunged in the course of their naming ceremony or baptism. The three boys sat in a row on one side of the basin, their bodies neatly folded up, so that with their chins they touched their knees. Three servant-maids clad in white cotton *huipillis* or sleeveless chemises, their black hair dyed slightly purple hanging down their backs, advanced slowly towards them with dignified steps, and with simple but graceful

gestures put before each of them an earthenware dish with a cake of roasted maize and red beans in it. The boys glanced at each other in doubt as to the proper thing to do and, by a tacit agreement, despite the tempting look of the offering, decided to wait and see. They had not to wait long. Under the arch opposite them, a procession was slowly emerging from the shadows of the palace into the sunny courtyard.

First came a maid carrying a tiny broom of dried maguëy leaves on a wooden tray; then another maid carrying a spindle, also of minute dimensions, on a folded cotton wrap; then a third maid carrying a work-basket of matting. These were the three symbols of the good housewife. After the three maids came the midwife with the new-born child which she conveyed in a basket, head first. Behind the child, the King himself walked smiling and happy. He was followed by Yeicatl or Three-Reeds, his chief steward, and a brilliant retinue of dignitaries dressed in bright-coloured wraps, richly adorned with necklaces, wristbands and even nose and lip pieces made of gold and precious stones—but all barefoot, except the King whose tiger-skin slippers were constellated with *chalchivvils* or jade-stones.

The three maids stood in a row, by the edge of the basin, offering their symbolic gifts to the budding housewife in the basket-cradle. The midwife laid the cradle on the ground, took first the broom, then the spindle, finally the work-basket and touched with them the tiny hands resting like rose petals on the toy huipilli the baby was wearing, then gave them back to the maids. She then undressed the baby and, pouring a few drops of water on its lips with her fingers, she said: "Daughter, open your mouth and receive Glow-of-Jade, goddess of water, who gives life." She sprinkled the baby's chest with water and said: "Here is clear water, to clean and refresh your heart and to awaken it." This made the infant cry, and a murmur of approval ran round the three sides of the lower gallery under the arches, where the women followed the scene with black eyes whetted by curiosity; the baby had cried: this would please Tlaloc, the god of rain, and therefore her life would be rich in maize, prosperous and wealthy. The midwife, however, undisturbed by the wave of emotion and comments which the infant's first tears had raised, sprinkled its head with the lustral water and said: "Here is the water, Glow-of-Jade, to make you watchful and preserve you from oversleeping." She then washed the baby's hands and said: "Let all thieving keep away from this child"; then the baby's groins and said: "Where are you, ill luck? Keep away from this child by the virtue of this clear water." The midwife laid down the little living copper doll on the cradle, and in lower tones recited the prayer to the Lady and to the Lord of the Night: "Lady Yohualticitl, goddess of cradles and General Mother

of All Children : The Lord of Heaven has sent us this infant to this world in which you are entrusted with her care, and thus I offer her to you for you to defend her, protect her and keep her warm in your bosom ; and I also entreat the Lord of Night, Yohualtecutli to provide a good lord for her." She then raised the cradle to the sky and in a loud voice exclaimed ; " Mother of all born things, defender of children, receive this one and keep her as yours."

The turn of the boys had come. She called on them to name the child. For lack of instructions, and seeing that their appetising dishes were getting cold, after brief glances of mutual consultation, they had tackled their meal ; and when the first boy, the one of the eastern side, was challenged by the midwife, he was taken unawares with his mouth full of red beans. There was an awkward silence while the boy made desperate efforts not only to swallow his mouthful but to look unconcerned and self-possessed about it. The women looked at each other with glances of wisdom and intelligence ; no need to speak at all : they all knew what it meant. *Xuchitl* would not be that infant's name for long. She would be exiled and would have to change her life and name, that name which the boy was at last able to call out with a ringing voice :

" *Xuchitl ! Xuchitl ! Xuchitl !* "

The second boy was more than ready and when challenged by the midwife he vociferated :

" *Xuchitl ! Xuchitl ! Xuchitl !* "

His powerful voice startled one of the three maids who patiently standing, had gone into a trance, possibly a doze. There was a clatter : the wooden tray and the broom had fallen from her hands on to the stony ground ; and again the women in the dark gallery exchanged knowing glances which shone in the shade, for the sign was obvious : *Xuchitl*'s first home would collapse suddenly and violently.

" *Xuchitl ! Xuchitl ! Xuchitl !* ", called out the third boy, and an eagle crossed the blue sky above them all, flying low from west to east. This clinched the prophecy. The women were sure now more than ever that little *Xuchitl* would leave her native land and be taken away eastwards by *Quetzalcoatl*, Lord of the Winds.

Nezawal Pilli had seen and heard all. He looked grave, but aloof and unconcerned.

2

After the ceremony, Nezawal Pilli summoned his chief steward *Yeicatl* or Three-Reeds.

" See that those three boys are given rich cotton wraps "—he

ordered—"the best you can find in the stores. And as for that first one who was not ready . . . who is he?"

"His name is Ixcawatzin."

"Where does that *tzin* come from?"—asked Nezawal Pilli, for *tzin* was a suffix denoting princely blood.

"He is a grandson of your royal father by one of his Mexican women. I do not recollect her name."

"Very well"—sentenced the King—"have him punished."

Three-Reeds asked: "Shall I make him breathe *axi* smoke?"

"No"—said the King—"he is too young for that. Just pierce his arms and legs with maguey thorns . . . Four in each limb will do."

Breathing *axi* smoke was a real torture. A handful of *axis*, a kind of red peppers, was made to burn on the ground and the boy's head was firmly held over the column of acrid, hot smoke, until he had to be taken away half choked, with tears pouring from his aching eyes. It was the usual punishment for boys too old to be daunted by the threat of having a dozen maguey thorns driven into their arms and legs. With his strong sense of strict and accurate justice, Nezawal Pilli was punishing a boy who had committed a serious fault with the exact punishment suitable for his age.

Born, though in the midst of a superstitious people, with a strong trend towards considering everything in the light of reason (even such acts as coming from his own unruly being sometimes pained and humiliated him), and trained moreover by his wise father, King Nezawal Coyotl, to use his own wits instead of having constantly to refer to old wives' tales for every step in life, Nezawal Pilli had gradually grown into a kind of bigot of reason, as a reaction against the world of auguries, spells, ghosts and evil eyes in which his countrymen were plunged. His rigid sense of justice, which no entreaties could bend, no affections could mollify, was but one of the forms in which his passionate desire for mental order found expression. He suffered only too much from the orgy of personal whim and caprice which passed for justice under the emperors of Mexico (his chief allies, and, up to a point, suzerains), not to endeavour to provide a stern example by his own objective justice which did not stop at the severest punishment even when the victim of his wrath happened to be one of his own sons or daughters.

Three-Reeds, lost no time in administering the punishment decreed by the king to young Ixcawatzin. The youngster was still living in a kind of nursery for boys in the grounds of the palace. Three-Reeds went there immediately after the baptism ceremony and had the boy fetched from the river which flowed past the house, where he was enjoying a bathe. The faithful steward was well provided with maguey-thorns. He sat on the mat in the centre of the master's room and made

Ixcawatzin lie in front of him, after tying his hands and his feet together, then, while explaining in dispassionate and didactic terms the reasons for the punishment, he boldly thrust four thorns into each limb of his victim. Ixcawatzin was a slender, graceful and handsome boy of seven. He had black, deep, fiery eyes, his most striking feature. He underwent the punishment without a tear, without a movement, without a word. Three-Reeds waited in silence for a while, then, one by one pulled out the sixteen thorns from the boy's arms and legs.

"As you are spilling blood in any case"—he suggested while he freed the boy again from his fetters—"why not offer it to the sun?" Still silent Ixcawatzin sprang to his feet, went to the door and gathering blood from his wounds with his fingers, he sprinkled it towards the setting sun. What was the motive, what the inspiration, he could not tell; but as he sprinkled his blood towards the sky, to the four cardinal points of space, he murmured:

"Xuchitl! Xuchitl! Xuchitl!"

He then came back, looked straight at Three-Reeds, without a trace of resentment or fear, with a straightforward, an almost virile respect, and said:

"Sir, I am seven. When am I to be received into the Calmecac?"

Three-Reeds stared at him. It was not usual for a mere boy to speak to a grown-up unbidden. He did not answer, and turning his back on the youngster, he left the room with a dignified step.

But, though he looked displeased, he was most proud of Ixcawatzin. The boy had stood the punishment like a man, and felt ripe for the Calmecac, the austere college in which under the harsh discipline of their priests, boys were trained for army and church duties. Three-Reeds went to the palace, to report the scene to the King. He found him on top of the north-west tower, which he had built in order to observe the skies—his favourite occupation. It was a narrow square, not more than three foot on each side, protected from the direct light of the sun by an awning. There, the King sat for long hours watching all the happenings on which his inquiring mind bestowed significance and mystery—clouds and birds and the regular movement of the shadows by day; stars and planets by night. No one, save his faithful Three-Reeds, was allowed to disturb him when he was thus engaged, and even Three-Reeds hesitated before intruding on his lofty privacy. But this time there was no hesitation in the chief steward's mind: his story contained a magic word which opened every door towards the King: Xuchitl!

The King was pleased at the boy's spirit, shocked at his bold lack of manners and puzzled on hearing how he had murmured his daughter's name when offering his blood to the four corners of the world. He had Ixcawatzin summoned to his presence.

Night was falling and the first bright stars were beginning to shine on the precise spots which he knew so well, when, with a last glance at all that certitude, he stepped down to the earth of errors, uncertainties and disappointments. He sat on an elaborate *icpalli*, a stool searchingly carved and heavily inlaid with gold, behind which hung a heavy curtain transfigured by the weaver's art into a black and green forest haunted by golden tigers. Two thick, tall pine torches, burning on pillars of copper, cast on the scene an ever vibrating light which seemed to endow the golden tigers with life and movement.

Three-Reeds, barefoot, walked softly in, followed by Ixcawatzin. The boy was naked, but for his *maxtilatl* or loincloth, still plain and unadorned by any sign, symbol, colour or design, since as yet he belong to no school, order or profession. He looked grave and respectful but by no means overawed.

"What is your name?" asked the King.

"Ixcawatzin," answered the boy in a clear voice.

"Do you know what it means?"

"Yes, sir. The Disdained One."

"Who gave you that name?"

"The priest, sir. He saw it in the stars."

The King smiled. "Who is your mother?"

"She was, sir. Her name was Cuicatlmolotl."

"Linnet-song!" exclaimed the King, for that was what the name meant to them both. "A pretty name. And who was she?"

"A daughter of King Nezawal Coyotl, your father," said the boy proudly.

"Who is your father?"

"He was," answered the boy. "His name was Iciuhtomitl."

"Who killed him?" asked the King, for it was not polite to assume that a man young enough to leave an orphan child, and whose name moreover meant "Swift-Bone-Dagger," could have died in his bed.

"He died in battle, in the Quautla wars, waged by Auitzotzin, Emperor of Mexico."

"And why," asked the King, coming at last to the point, "did you say *Xuchitl* three times four times as you offered sacrifice?"

The boy was taken by surprise. He waited, for he did not know what to answer. At last, he said:

"I did not say 'Xuchitl.'"

The King frowned hard, and his eyes turned to Yeicatl with genuine anger. Three-Reeds looked no less severe.

"He did, sir."

Lying, particularly for a boy of Ixcawatzin's status, was unthinkable. The King turned to his little nephew and merely said:

"Well?"

"It said itself, sir. I had no part in it. The name came from within."

There was a silence. Nezawal Pilli, no less keen an observer of the firmament within men than of that overhead, pondered over the boy's revelation. The name suppressed—the punishment. For a second, he cast a prophetic glance at the link which these fortuitous happenings might forge between those two children. . . . Then he dismissed the subject as too vague and distant for the pincers of his reason, and asked again, relieved at last of his doubts as to the boy's integrity :

"I hear you want to go to the Calmecac."

"Yes, sir," the boy answered simply.

"What do you want to become, a soldier or a priest?"

"Both," answered the youngster.

"Very well." The King turned to Three-Reeds. "Let it be. Take him to the Calmecac. His entrance gifts for the gods will come from my house. And see that they are worthy of his grandfather."

3

The ceremony took place the following day. Three-Reeds, preceded by several slaves carrying the presents and followed by the boy, arrived early in the morning at the gates of the Calmecac. He was received by the two High Priests. They were men of about fifty, whose skins bore numerous traces of thorn punctures, particularly on their ears, arms and legs, and in all possible stages, from fresh, bleeding wounds to old, crusty scars. They wore black cotton mantles clasped on the right shoulder, leaving open the right side, which showed their black loincloths, and on their backs they carried bags of tobacco, the herb on which all priests relied for help and comfort in their fastings and in their waking nights of prayer and sacrifice. Their thick, black manes never touched by water, comb or brush since they had entered divine service, were set in heavy, solid masses by a gruesome cement—the blood of many years of human sacrifices.

They were wreathed in smiles at receiving a boy of royal blood, for there was both honour and wealth in it. The presents to Quetzalcoatl, god of the wind, were handsome; and above the usual holy papers and bags of copal incense the slaves brought many loads of the finest cotton wraps, necklaces of golden shrimps, of golden lizards, of golden butterflies, of chalchiwitsl, of precious feathers—lovely and rich offerings which made the priests' mouths water, of course in anticipation of the pleasure the god would receive from them. After brief speeches of greetings and thanks, the two High Priests led their guests

into the inner yard, where the monks and the boys were gathered in rows : the monks all in black, the boys all naked but for their loin-cloths ; and Ixcawatzin was received in the midst of his new companions to the boisterous rhythmic sounds of scores of conch trumpets and of wooden drums.

Three-Reeds advanced solemnly between the row of black-robed priests on the right and the seething copper-coloured mass of boys on the left, till he stood at the foot of Quetzalcoatl. The god of the Winds or Feathered Serpent was represented as a man dyed black, wearing an embroidered white shirt showing the body through the open work in the texture ; on his head he wore a tiger-skin mitre topped with a crest of feathers ; from his ears hung heavy ear-pieces of turquoise-coloured mosaic, and on his chest shone a golden necklace from which hung several long golden shrimps. On his feet and legs, tiger-skin hose up to the knee, with golden shrimps hanging from the upper edge, over which he wore black sandals. On his left hand, a buckler with a five-point star design. On his right hand, a sceptre of gold and precious stones, in shape not unlike a bishop's crosier though much shorter.

Three-Reeds squatted worshipfully before the god, with Ixcawatzin by his side, and one by one, offered the presents as they were handed to him by the King's slaves. The two High Priests received them from his hands, after he had formally raised them towards the god, and wraps, golden necklaces, precious stones and feathers vanished into the treasure room at the back of the shrine. This done, two acolytes quickly removed the loincloth from the boy's waist and painted his body black from head to foot, then threw round his neck the *tlacopatli*, a necklace of wooden beads. The boy was now ready for the offering of his own person and Three-Reeds spoke :

" In the name of the King, who represents the father of this boy, the knight Swift-Bone-Dagger, who, having been killed in battle, is in the realm of the Sun, sucking flowers like a humming bird, I, Three-Reeds, offer him to our Lord Quetzalcoatl, otherwise known as Tilpotonqui, at the gates of the Calmecac, house of penitence and tears, where noble men are bred, and where he may win the treasures that flow from the gods with his penance, tears and sighs, and ask to be granted wealth. We therefore beg you humbly to receive him and hold him as your son so that he may live with the other ministers of our gods in prayers and penance."

The chief priest then made answer :

" We, though unworthy, have heard your words, in which you offered us for the Calmecac this precious stone, this rich feather, son of Swift-Bone-Dagger and nephew of the King. Your words were really meant, not for us, but for Quetzalcoatl, otherwise known as

Tilpotonqui, on whose behalf we heard them. He knows best what to do with your precious stone and rich feather. As for us, his humble servants, we cannot say with certainty 'this shall be,' 'this shall not be.' We leave it to our almighty lord to do this or that with this our new son."

A fresh outburst of conch trumpets and wooden drums closed the ceremony. The priest then took the wooden necklace from the boy's neck and said to Three-Reeds :

"This necklace will represent the spirit of the boy and will do penance for him. Take him back to his games."

Three-Reeds was fully aware of this abuse which had crept into the otherwise austere ways of the Calmecac. Rich boys were in this way exempted from the hardships which life in the monastery entailed. But he felt uneasy both about its effects on the boy's generous enthusiasm and about the King's own attitude in the matter. After turning it over in his mind : "No," he said definitely. "Keep the boy. The King prefers it. And he would rather stay."

4

In the year 10-Rabbits (our 1502), Auitzotzin, Emperor of Mexico, died in his capital Tenochtitlan, the Mexico City of our day. Nezawal Pilli went to the chief Aztec city to attend the funeral ceremonies and to share in the election of the new Emperor. Women remained in the background, even during such solemn moments of family life, and neither of his queens, though closely related to the dead Emperor, accompanied her royal husband in his pious pilgrimage, Nezawal Pilli, the most respected monarch in the Empire, dominated the electoral council and, on his advice, the choice fell on Moteczuma, son of Axayacatl, who had been one of Auitzotzin's predecessors on the imperial throne.

All this took time. The day Nezawal Pilli started on his way home, as the oarsmen of the royal canoe were striking the water with their first stroke, an oar snapped with a dry noise and the oarsman lost his balance and fell backwards as the short stump rose in the air. After they had all recovered their balance and the graceful craft was slipping over the blue waters of the lagoon towards Tetzcuco, the King noticed that his men were gloomy and dispirited.

"I know what you are thinking," he said in a quiet, paternal, almost affectionate voice. "That oar which broke and upset Ixtlicoyu's balance has also upset you all. You think it is an ill omen. Now, Ixtlicoyu, you never deserved your name better." (Ixtlicoyu means Long Face in Nauatl, the language of the Aztecs.) But his men were

not in a mood for this light-hearted vein. He waited for a while till, as he expected, Long Face said, "It means death for someone of us or close to us."

"It means nothing but a broken oar, which anything can cause."

"There was no cause for it," argued Long Face showing his stump. "The water is deep at that spot and I hit nothing."

"Show me the stump," ordered the King. He examined it closely. "See," he showed it to his men. "This is where it broke to-day. But that is where it had been split for some time without your noticing it. Don't you see the difference in the colour and surface of the wood? You are as silly as the merchants who shake with fear when in their journeys they hear the *oactli* laughing in the dark woods; yet, everybody knows the *oactli* is a bird which laughs."

"I'd rather not hear him laugh," said the cautious oarsman, taking back the stump from the King's hands, while his companions, with their downcast eyes fixed on their inward fears, rowed on in silence, gloomy and unconvinced.

Gloomier still was the face of Three-Reeds who was awaiting his master at the landing stage. He greeted the King in silence, helped him to land and led him to the litter in which four gentlemen of the Household, richly clad but barefoot, were to convey him to the palace. Nezawal Pilli sat on a matting seat which stood on the silver floor of his conveyance under an awning of cotton and feather cloth supported by four pillars of silver and gold. "Well," he asked, noticing his steward's silence and gloomy looks, "what is the matter?"

"Sir," answered the steward, "the queen is dead."

Both knew that Fruity Nipple was meant. The other queen mattered but little. There was a silence during which Three-Reeds respected the King's struggle for self-mastery. Nezawal Pilli sat motionless, the pole and the centre of a human storm, while round him his oarsmen dispersed, muttering prayers to Mictlantecutli, god of death and of hell, and incantations to drive off the power of omens. As for Long Face, he hurried off, to relieve his anxiety at the house of a *tonalpouhque* or sorcerer and omen-guesser.

"How and when?" asked Nezawal Pilli quietly.

"This morning. The Queen had gone to the temple of Tetzcatlipuca. We had all advised her not to go, for the *tocolotl* had hooted three times during the night and there is no surer sign of death than the hooting of that accursed bird, but she was determined to go, as to-day is the first of the month of Toxcatl, and she was afraid the king of the gods would be angry and avenge himself on Princess Xuchitl."

"Less detail," said the King shortly.

"She was wearing new *cactli*, which her maid thought too short

for her feet. She insisted on walking up the one hundred and twenty steps of the temple and refused the priests' offer to take her up on the back of one of them. And when she was nearly at the top, she slipped and fell. No one was able to stop her falling down and down till she lay helpless in a bath of blood on the temple yard below. We did all we could. We washed her wounds with warm urine and pressed them with roast maguey leaf, but Mictlantecutli pulled so hard, we were not able to hold her."

"Where is the body?"

"In her apartments, in the south wing."

"Where is Xuchitl?"

"With her nurses, in the north wing."

"Let us go home."

5

The news of Queen Fruity Nipple's death spread like wildfire in the harem, raising waves of hope in the women who expected advancement in the King's favours and waves of terror in those who, being slaves, were liable to accompany the dead queen on her long pilgrimage through the dark regions. An honour for the queen's own maids, this vicarious sacrifice was for the King's concubines a mere surrender of an idle and privileged position for the dubious advantages of the dark unknown. The Chief Steward had to exert all his authority over them to obtain help for the funeral rites, for which no woman was forthcoming lest such an offer of service were misinterpreted as a self-designation for the funeral pyre. When King Nezawal Pilli arrived in the palace, the Queen's body had been washed and the gashes in it sewn with maguey needles and human hair. It sat, with its knees close to its chin, dressed in funeral white paper, with a paper diadem on its head. The eyes were closed, the mouth had set into the delicate curve of the smile which had so often graced it in life. The aromatic smoke of copal incense rose in four blueish threads from four copper burners in the four corners of the hall. Round the wall, a score of women, sitting on mats, were cutting papers for the funeral on the expert instructions of a funeral paper-cutter. The silence was so complete that the rustling of the paper as it was first folded, then cut with obsidian blades, shocked the ear by its intensity and the women endeavoured to deafen the noise with their hands.

Nezawal Pilli entered the hall followed by the Grand Priest, who held in leash a brown dog which had belonged to the queen. The dog was to accompany his mistress. (He had to be brown because on coming to the river which both were to cross, he would, if he had been

white, have been able to say as an excuse : " I have already been washed," while if he had been black, he would have been able to say : " No water can ever wash me.") The King was wearing a white mantle hemmed with black rabbit-fur, clasped on the right side of the neck, which allowed his vigorous copper-coloured body to be seen through the side-opening. The priest was also in white and over his long robe he wore a vestment not unlike the surplice of Christian priests ; his head was an imposing mass of black hair, cemented by human blood. He stood in silence for a few minutes before the body, then made the sacramental speech :

" Oh daughter, the hardships of this life are now past for thee. As one who warms himself in the sun, thou hast lived in this brief life and now Mictlantecutli and Mictecaciaoatl, lord and lady of the dark regions, have taken thee away to where there is room for all and memory for none. Thou art gone to the dark abode wherein there are neither doors nor windows, from which thou shalt never return."

With the help of the funeral paper-cutter, he then shrouded the body with paper, tied up with paper bands ; with his right hand, he sprinkled the body with water, saying : " Here is some of the water thou didst enjoy in this world " ; then he offered the body a small jug of water, saying : " This is water for thy journey." A bundle of cotton wraps and papers was then offered with the words : " Here is for thee to pass between two mountains which rise close to each other ; " another bundle of cotton wraps was offered with the words : " Here is for thee to pass the road where thou wilt meet the Snake ; " and yet three more with the words : " Here is for thee to pass the place where the Green Lizard will come out to meet thee ;"—" Here is for thee to walk through the eight moors ;"—" Here is for thee to climb over the eight passes." Finally a bigger bundle of wraps with the words : " And here are the wraps for thee to withstand Ytzehecaya, the wind of knives."

The priest then offered the dog : " And here is the brown dog for thee to swim on his back across the river Chicunoapa, on the way to hell." As the priest spoke these words the funeral paper-cutter shot a deadly arrow point-blank at the dog's throat, and the body, still panting, was laid by that of the dead queen along with the wraps and papers ready for the journey.

Nezawal Pilli had listened in an absent silence. He was sceptical as to his people's religious rites and respected them only for political reasons. The day's ceremonies were over. The state funeral was to take place the following day, when the princes representing the allied Kingdoms of Mexico and Tlacopan were expected.

Moteczuma sent his brother Cuitlahuac as his representative. The King of Tlacopan came in person. Both brought a number of rich

wraps to clothe the body or to burn with it (so that the departed should have the use of them) and a number of slaves to sacrifice during the ceremony and to burn on a special pyre so that they should serve the Queen along with those Nezawal Pilli himself would send to the dark region with his wife. When the two princes mentioned the subject to Nezawal Pilli, the widowed King announced that he proposed to break that custom and would sacrifice no slaves.

"What," exclaimed Cuitlahuac with eyebrows raised and flashes in his eyes, "a queen sent to Mictlantecutli like a slave, not even like a slave, like a dog, without a retinue of servants which even a merchant's wife would take with her?"

He was dumbfounded and so was the King of Tlacopan. Cuitlahuac told Nezawal Pilli that Moteczuma would not swallow the insult, for the queen was a Mexican. The King of Tetzcuco was taken somewhat unawares, for when he tried to explain his objections, his profound disbelief in all the puerile cosmogony on which the custom rested, he felt the two men so distant from him, and the background of his own convictions so vast and complex, that there was not even an idiom common to the three of them in which to discuss the matter. He sat on his low mat, leaning on a stiff back of matting, looking at his two guests as they argued the point with a fire unusual in their world of well-controlled manners, and wondered.

6

Meanwhile, the oarsman had been discussing the matter of the broken oar with his sorcerer. This worthy lived in the outskirts of the town, high up close to the woods, uncomfortably close for those who feared the ill omen of either roaring beast or ghostly wood-cutter whose hatchet-strokes predicted the death of any one who heard them. He was an old man with eyes like gimlets, set close to his nose, deep in the eye-sockets. His fingers were long and crooked, well armed with horny, long-pointed nails.

"The sign is unmistakable. Someone in your family must die. Someone close to you. Not you, but one whom you often hold, as you hold the oar. Are you married?" On an affirmative nod from the oarsman, who had hardly any voice left, the tonalpouhque asked: "Does she live at home as a housewife or has she some other occupation?"

"She is a servant in the Queen's household."

"Now, see this sign." He showed him a sheet of rough henequen-paper covered with uncouth designs: burning sticks with smoke rising from them, a snake, a bundle of wraps and other familiar or con-

ventional objects, which in their combination, under the complex pictorial script of the Aztecs, might mean anything, and he said : " Do you see how plain it was that the queen must die to-day ? I have read the signs. She must be buried to-morrow. To-morrow your wife will be sacrificed on the funeral fire."

" How can I stop that ? " the oarsman asked, shaking with fear.

" Go to the big temple, draw blood three times from your tongue and from your arms and legs. Do not touch your wife. Get some copal incense and some holy paper. Ask your wife to cut a lock of hair from the top of her head——"

" The funeral lock ? " asked the oarsman, terrified.

" Yes. She need not cut it all. A few hairs only. Do not touch it yourself. Have the hair and the copal wrapped together in the holy paper and bring it here to-night."

The unfortunate Long Face hurried to the palace. His wife, CITLALI (Star) was one of the servants who prepared the Queen's meals and, as she was handsome and starry eyed, she often served at table. When her husband arrived, she was listening with angry face and flashing eyes to a speech which one of the staff, an older woman, was delivering to a number of maids and cooks. They were all dressed in sleeveless cotton *huipils* or chemises and some of them wore one or two light skirts as well. Their black hair hung down to the middle of their backs. Some had in their hands the household implements of the work in which they happened to be engaged when the sensational news had reached them.

" It is a shame on us all," shouted the irate virago. " Why ? Does the King imagine that we are such filthy dung that he will not find thirty women amongst us fit to accompany the Queen on her way to Mictlantecutli ? And it is worse than a shame : it is a danger ! " she brandished a long wooden spoon, burnt black on the edge with usage. Her teeth were painted red, in the fashion of rich ladies, which gave a sinister light to her inflammatory words. " How is the lord of the dark region to take the insult ? And his good lady Mictecaciaoatl who does not trifle with her dignity ? Can the King tell us ? Since he can turn at will into a lion or an eagle, why does he not fly over to Mictlan, where there are neither doors nor windows, and find out the position before he decides ? We have made up our minds, anyhow : the Queen shall not go alone, and if the King will not name those who must go with her, we will."

There was a roar of approval in which Citlali joined heartily.

7

Nezawal Pilli was still sitting with the two princes over this conflict about the funeral sacrifice of the slaves when Three-Reeds asked leave to impart some urgent information to him. The Chief Steward had been impressed with the commotion raised in the King's household by the news that the queen was to depart without slaves.

"The unrest is beginning to spread outside the palace walls."

"But I have not spoken a word to any one . . . not even to you, on my intentions . . . whatever they are !"

"Sir"—explained Three-Reeds, "the people know that you have your own ways and like to follow them ; and they have noticed the absence of the usual measures and ceremonies which by now would have been taken were slaves to accompany the queen."

There was a silence. Nezawal Pilli was reflecting on the situation. He was gradually coming to the melancholy conclusion that, in the circumstances, the *reasonable* thing was to select fifty women of Queen Fruity Nipple's household and to have them sacrificed in the usual way on a funeral pyre close to that which would consume the queen's body and all the wraps and jewels which she needed for her journey without return.

8

Long Face was talking matters over with his wife. He was agitated ; she was calm.

"You see," he said, "the sorcerer cannot be wrong. He says it is certain you are to die."

"That is plain to me: I don't need any tonalpouhque to tell me." She looked straight at him, with her starry eyes unperturbed.

"But . . . but . . ." He found no words to express how hurt he felt at her callousness.

"There is no 'but.' I am one of her household. I must go with her. How could I look any one in the face if I let her go without me ? I knew it all along when I took service, didn't I ?"

"But . . . I . . . you leave me behind . . ."

"Well. You knew also. Didn't you ? . . . And I dare say . . ."

"You dare say what ?"

"You might come too . . . I'm sure Three-Reeds would let you come with us."

Long Face did not like that.

"It is not the custom. I am not in the queen's, but in the King's household."

"You might be useful to row us across over the river Chicunoapa, if the dog failed us," pointed out Citlali with feminine practical sense.

"Not if my oar broke, though, as it would be sure to do, for I must be under a curse about it, I am sure, . . ." He mused over those regions which they both felt quite real, material and close to them, just beyond death, which was but a quick though painful operation. "I wonder what it is like. No doors. No windows. It can't be very merry. Do you think there is any *pulque* over there or some other drink like that? And maguey? And flowers? . . . Oh and water, lakes and all the lovely light on the lagoon! . . . How can we know? . . . No one has been there and the priests only talk by hearsay. . . ." He looked at her. She was lost in a dream and it seemed to him that her features were softer than erewhile and not so set. He felt drawn towards her body and was going to embrace her when he suddenly remembered the ban on touching her which had been laid on him by the tonalpouhque. "Must you leave us?" he asked. To his great surprise, she answered with an unexpected question :

"How can it be helped?"

Eagerly, he pressed his advantage home.

"Oh, that is simple enough. The tonalpouhque had no doubts about it. If you give me a lock of your funeral hair——"

"I dare not."

There was a silence. Then, with an ashamed voice, offering her head to him, she said :

"Cut it off yourself."

He drew back :

"I must not touch you."

She looked in his eyes, then let her own wander over his young, vigorous, naked body, then cast a long, contemplative glance on the lovely garden through the window. "There are neither doors nor windows," said her inner voice. She picked up an obsidian knife from the hearth and cut a lock of hair from the crown of her head. He had laid the sheet of holy paper on the ground. She laid the hair on it, with a deep sigh. He covered it with copal incense, wrapped it up with the paper and ran out without looking back. . . .

When Three-Reeds brought to the King the list of the fifty women who were to be sacrificed during the funeral, Nezawal Pilli glanced at it with an indifferent eye and was going to hand it back to his steward when he was struck by a curious ideograph : a star, a long face and a broken oar.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"Citlali, one of the Queen's maids. She is the wife of Long Face."

Nezawal Pilli was turning the matter over in his mind. If Citlali died, the omen of the broken oar would be confirmed. If Citlali lived, the omen would be belied.

"Strike that name off the list."

Three-Reeds left the room, wondering what was the cause of the King's wrath against the oarsman and his wife on whom he inflicted such an insult.

IO

The funeral took place the next day. The Queen's body was dressed with twenty cotton wraps, as soft as the best silk, woven and embroidered with the most exquisite workmanship. When it was ready, the King, dressed in a rich heavy red mantle and wearing the blue diadem, came in state to put inside the dead queen's mouth the funeral chalchiwiltl, a small jade-stone, which symbolised the heart of the departed. It was noticed by the small number of those present whose curiosity, more powerful than their respect, made them dare to cast their eyes on the scene, that, before inserting the funeral chalchiwiltl into the queen's mouth, the King took out of it another object. No one was in a position to say for certain what this object was, though some could have said, had they dared confess their sin, that a gold chain was attached to it, and others that it looked like a piece of jade cut in the shape of a heart.

The Chief Priest, who had stood at a respectful distance while the King fulfilled his pious duty towards his wife, came forward then, cut off the funeral lock from the Queen's head and deposited it in a small wooden box alongside the birth lock which had waited there for the end of the queen's life from its beginning. The funeral mask was then laid on the Queen's face. The body was now ready for cremation. Preceded by the fifty slaves who were to be sacrificed, and followed by the King, the princes and a host of black-mantled priests intoning a funeral song, the body was conveyed in a rich litter to the chief temple, in the forecourt of which a pyre of resinous pines covered with copal incense awaited its prey. Another pyre of bigger dimensions was burning in a corner of the vast yard for the dog and the slaves. The body of the Queen was laid on the first pyre—a forbidding sight in its rigid shape, glittering with jewels, overburdened with coloured mantles, its face covered with a red and black mask. And while it burnt away into ashes and smoke, innocent victims were one by one sacrificed on the gory stone and thrown down on to the humbler fire

to carry on in after-life the service they had rendered in this life to their sweet mistress.

Nezawal Pilli stood motionless and absent throughout the whole grim ceremony. On top of the one hundred and eleven steps, Tetzcatlipuca and Witchilopochtli grinned with their double row of teeth in their turquoise masks. Higher up, ever so much higher, the sun poured its light over gods, king, subjects and gory victims with a glorious indifference.

11

Nezawal Pilli longed to be home and to wash away all that sight from his memory. He was a brave warrior—could he else have been raised to the throne in a nation of warlike men?—and what afflicted his spirit was not the sight of blood, but the sight of tragic nonsense. He brooded over it all, rocked in his gold and silver litter, on his way back to the palace.

“Three-Reeds!”

The faithful steward, who walked by the litter, came closer to his master.

“Send for Long Face. I must see him at once.” And a smile of mischievous satisfaction came to light up his handsome features for the first time since his wife’s death.

12

Long Face entered the King’s apartments, stealthily and sideways, as required both by Aztec etiquette and by the fear which possessed his soul at this unexpected summons. He was immediately introduced to the King’s presence.

“Now, Long Face, who have you lost in your own family?”

“No one, sir,” he answered, somewhat puzzled.

“The ill omen of the broken oar has not proved right,” said the King victoriously.

“I very nearly lost Citlali, my wife,” argued Long Face.

“But you did not.”

“No, sir.”

“Do you know why?” asked the King, ready with his rationalistic explanation.

“Yes, sir.”

Surprised at Long Face’s self-assurance, Nezawal Pilli waited.

“I went to the Tonalpouhque and told him all. He . . . I pro-

vided the materials he needed and he charmed off the spell . . . last night."

Nezawal Pilli felt both pity and indignation in his heart, With a severe voice, he said :

" I gave orders for your wife to be struck off the list."

" Yes, sir. That was the way the sorcerer brought it off."

The King was silent for a while, then :

" Go ! " he said.

13

Three-Reeds begged leave to consult his royal master on the ceremonies of the second funeral, which were due on the fourth day after the cremation of the body. A wooden image of the departed queen, gorgeously dressed in royal attire, had been erected in the temple yard. The magic box containing her birth and her death locks as well as the chalchiwilt which the King had put in her mouth was laid before the image, together with offerings, renewed every day, of choice foods and roses for the journey. On the fourth day a special offering had to be made, together with the sacrifice of another ten or fifteen slaves, for it was held that the first batch might by then be tired. Three-Reeds came to submit the list of these fifteen slaves.

Nezawal Pilli turned the matter over in his mind. If he had Citlali sacrificed, the tonalpouhque would be discredited.

" Add Citlali, Long Face's wife, to the list."

Three-Reeds left wondering how that obscure family had managed to regain favour so quickly.

14

Citlali was alive. So far so good. But she was depressed and even gloomy. All the best women in the Queen's household had gone with their mistress, all those she cared to associate with ; and here she was left with the second lot, some of whom no doubt would join their mistress with the batch of the fourth-day funeral. Her animal spirits rejoiced in breathing and in seeing the light of the sun, but her pride was hurt. She stayed at home, saw no one and, of course, never appeared at the palace.

She was sitting by the hearth in her house, close to the palace backyard. Her *metatl*, the stone maize-grinder, waited in front of her; as it had waited in front of her mother, for the spirit of everyday courage to move her to work. " To be alive . . . " she thought. " It is good to be alive. But, what is the good of being alive if one is to

be despised and to live lonely?" Suddenly, her eyes grew wider and wider and her face paler and paler as she stared at the door, motionless and fascinated. An *epatl* or skunk was sitting on the threshold, feeling very much at home, looking at her with quiet, friendly though pointed eyes. It was in itself a wholly inoffensive animal (save for its pungent smell) but Citlali *knew* that such a visitation meant death either to her or to Long Face, for this was a most infallible omen. She saw a shadow in the steep, sloping street, behind the animal. She raised her eyes and beheld her husband, nailed to the ground by terror at the sight of the ominous animal on his threshold. And the scene might have lasted till the end of the world (which, as a matter of Aztec fact, was due within nine years) had not a third character arrived upon the stage. This was no less a person than Three-Reeds.

For some unknown reason, the *epatl*, by no means a shy animal, chose to depart, as if three human beings were more than he could stand together, and Three-Reeds did not notice what was happening in the minds of man and wife, for when he came upon the scene he was deep in the study of the cloth covered with glyphs on which were figured the sixteen women to be sacrificed.

"Citlali?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered the maid without moving from the mat by the hearth.

"I come to fetch your funeral lock."

They all knew what it meant. The *epatl* had brought them tidings of it. The *epatl* could not be wrong. There was nothing to be done. Tears came to Citlali's eyes, tears which her pride did not allow her to shed in the Chief Steward's presence. She wept, not for her life but for her pride. She ought to have gone with the first batch, with the prominent women, instead of lingering to go with scullions and kitchen-maids. While she mourned over her error and Long Face struggled to hide his feelings, Three-Reeds had leant over Citlali's head and was closely examining her hair.

"Who has been tampering with your funeral lock?" he asked severely. Husband and wife were taken aback by this unexpected complication. There was a silence.

"I was combing my hair and it got so . . . I mean I could not unravel it, and as I was in a hurry, I just tore it off with my comb."

Three Reeds frowned, very much displeased. He doubted whether the priests would accept such a victim. There was hardly any hair left for the funeral lock. He hesitated for a while, cut off whatever hair there was on the funeral spot, wrapped it up in a sheet of holy paper and went away saying:

"Be ready. I will come again. The ceremony will take place to-morrow at dawn."

15

Husband and wife sat facing each other in gloomy silence. She was thinking of her pride ; he was thinking of the persistence of ill omens. He loved his wife, that is, his wife was for him a familiar female to whose shape, warmth and aroma he was by now used and which he did not want to change. But he was beginning to wonder whether, after all, she was not past praying for, owing to her ill-starred birth. He had spent half his reserves of cocoa-almonds, all his capital, in tonalpouhque's fees for releasing her from the broken oar spell, and now there came this warning from the *epatl*, so quickly proved prophetic. Was it worth while ? His mind switched off to the *Tianquizco* or market-place. On the corner of it, under the deep shadow of the arches, there was a pulque shop with a lovely garden where a fellow could enjoy his drink and a quiet game of *patolli* undisturbed by worldly or other-worldly cares. This constant fear of an impending threat made relaxation imperative. His wife was lost in a moody contemplation of the *metatl*. He rose, noiselessly, and stole towards the door.

"Where are you going ?"

"I am on duty for cleaning the canoe," he explained. "I shan't be long." And he vanished.

16

He knew he was running away from real things into unreal ones, that is from things that hurt and mean something, to a square mat crossed and recrossed by lines of rubber on which he would be throwing blue stones and coloured dice, nothings thrown on nothing to while away the time doing nothing while his wife was getting ready for the funeral pyre. There was a foretaste of pulque in it all which drove him forward with a light step. The sun was setting. On his way to the market-place a crier on a terrace was announcing to passers-by—priests especially—that the Lord (i.e. the Sun) was already on the spot in the sky which marked the time for the evening sacrifice. He feigned not to hear and stopped for a while to listen to a musician who, at a street corner, was singing the glories of past emperors to the accompaniment of a wooden drum which he struck with his ten fingers most skilfully. When he had listened long enough to have forgotten the religious crier, he steered again towards the market-place. Most merchants, men and women, had gathered up the goods on maguey-leaf and palm-leaf mats, and were counting the cotton-shawls and the purses of cocoa-almonds which represented their day's gains. Some

were even hiding small quills filled with gold dust. He cast an envious glance at all this wealth and pressed the purse under his loincloth in which he carried his own cocoa-almonds—all his savings. He hurried on, entered the side gallery under a stone arch and, drawing aside a heavy curtain, stole into the pulque shop.

There was no one in it, but he heard voices in the garden where a game of patolli was evidently going on. So far as he could judge at a first glance the players were a soldier and a merchant; not much of a soldier, he thought on closer inspection: one of those *matlatzinco* or sling-men who opened the battle in the vanguard, shouting and hooting at the enemy and even throwing an occasional stone or two at him before real business begins. "Yes. That is it"—he confirmed mentally. "That thing he is wearing round his head looks to me like his sling." Not much of a merchant either, he thought, on looking at the other player. "Certainly not a *pochteca*; at most one of those miserable low-class merchants of whom no one ever knows whether they are merchants or spies. He must be on the eve of his departure for he has had his head shaven."

Meanwhile the players had noticed the arrival of a newcomer and had offered him their earthenware jugs of pulque.

"Just one draught," said Long Face as he drained the contents of the soldier's jug, without pausing for breath.

"Fine drinker, by Yzquitecatl, god of all the drinks!" The soldier spoke without malice and his merry eyes, in a clear, simple and good-humoured face, meant what they said. The merchant, a smaller and an older man, with slit eyes, hardly visible under heavy eyelids, thought himself justified in drawing back his proffered jug, but Long Face had seized it already, and before the slow-witted merchant had realised what was happening, the second jug was returned to him empty.

"Now, let us play," said Long Face, relieved at last of his inner anxiety and, seizing hold of the three blue stones and of the three coloured dice, he threw them on the mat.

"Twelve!" he announced.

The soldier and the merchant looked at each other somewhat puzzled at this irruption. The sly, little eyes of the merchant kept glancing rapidly from the game to the newcomer and from the newcomer to the empty jugs which now lay sideways on the ground at the foot of a nopal plant.

"Tzocaca!" he called the tavern-keeper. It was not much of a name, for *tzocaca* means *wart*, but in so far as one Tzocaca had been amongst the three inventors of pulque or, in the original Mexican, *teometl* (drink of the gods), any tavern-keeper might feel honoured in being so addressed. "More *teometl*. Don't you see the empty jugs,

lying on their bellies ? ” And seizing the dice he threw them on the mat : “ Thirteen. ”

The soldier was thinking it over. He shrugged his shoulders and he said to Long Face, who had picked up the dice, “ Here, what about me ? ” And throwing them on the mat he announced : “ ten ! ”

Long Face was emptying his third jug of burning teometl, the drink distilled from the honey of the metl or maguey. In the landscape within, his wife was fast receding into a hazy, unreal horizon, while without, there was hot life drawing away one by one his cocoa-almonds out of his purse. He played on, with this kind merchant and with this kind soldier who were so generous with their drink. Night had fallen ; his two partners spoke of giving up the game, with less conviction than he was in a position to notice. He stuck to the dice and made Tzocaca the tavern-keeper bring a pine torch which he planted on the ground. He even paid for the light with a few almonds of his own purse. Suddenly, through the fumes of drink which befogged his mind, an idea struck him, an odd idea, one which seemed to him to interfere somehow with his plans, though he could not actually grasp why : his purse was flat. No almonds left. He felt that this ought to worry him, and at first wondered whether this worry which he ought to feel was the same as that which he did not want to feel and which had driven him to the tavern. He was struggling hard to elucidate this conundrum in his mind, though he also felt that it was not in his mind that the two worries struggled for recognition, but in the pit of his stomach.

“ I know what it is, ” he said to his partners, who eyed him curiously, while he stood helpless in front of the patolli-mat, with the dice in one hand and a jug of teometl in the other. “ I know what it is. I am full of rabbits. ”

The two compeers laughed. Four-hundred-rabbits was the popular name for the spirit of strong drink which overpowers the drinker.

“ Four hundred rabbits at least, that is certain, ” said the soldier.

“ Are you going to the wars ? ” asked Long Face, looking him up and down with an unexpected and wholly unsuccessful effort at dignity.

“ To-morrow morning, ” answered the soldier. “ We must meet in Chalco the forces of the new emperor who must conquer enough prisoners for his coronation sacrifices. ”

“ Let us drink to your victory. I hope you will take one prisoner alive and throw away that *tematatl* which you wear round your head that makes you look like an old woman. ”

The soldier grinned. It was an allusion both to his looks and to his valour, for a soldier who had taken one prisoner alive was allowed to comb his hair in a distinctive way, though even then he would still be at the bottom of the scale of heroism. He looked the oarsman down

from head to foot : " Your skin will not be worth three cocoa-almonds within a while," he said ominously, in a cold but determined fury.

This did not suit the merchant, who had his own views on Long Face's skin and on his splendid back.

" Now, now," he said soothingly, " no monkeying with the game. We must finish this rubber." And winking at the soldier, he lied boldly, " Long Face must play on or pay the eighty almonds he owes already to each of us."

There were too many rabbits running to and fro in poor Long Face's brain for him to realise what was happening. Wart, the inn-keeper, looked on with a broad smile ; he was familiar with this kind of " game " and not altogether disinterested in its outcome. The soldier calmed down as soon as he tumbled to it all and the game proceeded gaily while more rounds of drink made Long Face's mind foggier and foggier. It was not long before the merchant coldly informed him that he owed them each one hundred almonds.

Nothing daunted at news which, if sober, would have made him rave against the merchant, Long Face said unperturbed, " Well, what of it ? " There was a silence. " I am a free man, am I not ? "

" Not for long," thought the astute merchant, watching his victim sink into the trap with his thin slit eyes.

" I am a free man ! " vociferated Long Face in a challenging way, " and a man is worth more than three hundred cocoa-almonds."

" How much ? " asked the merchant, with his eye on the goods.

" I play for four hundred almonds," Long Face announced with a determination which emerged from his unsteady mind as the mast of a sunken ship from the stormy waves.

" That means," explained the merchant, to be on the safe side, " that if you win you get two hundred almonds net——"

" Four, I said," laid down Long Face.

" Less two which you owe us, that makes two."

Long Face thought hard for a while, steadying himself against the wall, then he acquiesced with a hiccup, " . . . and if you lose," the merchant went on, " you become my slave before these two witnesses."

" That is right," said Long Face. " That is all right. Why not ? A man must stick to his word. I said it. I said it."

The game was a pure formality. The drunken man was too far gone to see the cheating. He lost his liberty. Wart, an expert at these proceedings from which he derived quite an income, brought a paper and some quills and colours and the four men wrote it all down in the form of a private deed. Before they had finished it, Iztlicoyu was snoring deep on the ground. The merchant left all the cocoa-almonds to the soldier and the tavern-keeper.

He was in a hurry, for the caravan was to leave at dawn, and the traditional ceremonies and banquet had still to be gone through in the house of a prosperous Pochteca who lived close to the old palace of Nezawal Coyotl. He hurried through the market-place for he was late, and a mere *naaaloxtomeca* or inferior merchant as he was had no right to such a breach of etiquette. He walked slowly in the dark patches of the town, though moonlit streets allowed him now and then a quicker pace, paying no attention to the prostitutes who stood at dark corners chewing *tzictl* between their pink-dyed teeth, less to clean them than to attract the passer-by with the castanet noise of the chewing. When he arrived at last at the house of the rich Pochteca, everybody was busy cutting the holy papers and melting drops of hot rubber on them to draw the signs and figures in honour of their several gods. A paper flag, tied to a red mast, had already been presented to Xiuhtecutli, god of fire; Tlatecutli, god of abundance, was being offered prayers which every merchant took away close to his chest after the ceremony. Then the staves were prepared, of black reed ornamented with papers consecrated to the god of merchants, Yacatecutli; papers in the shape of butterflies were then offered to Zacatzontli and to Tlacotzontli, gods of the road. Some of these papers were burnt in front of the fire, others carefully preserved for the divine protection which they were sure to afford. These ceremonies were all celebrated in the central patio of the house.

The merchants were then invited indoors by their host and stood in a circle before the hearth, which lit their eager features from beneath. A few quails were beheaded in honour of the Fire, and the merchants drew blood also from their own ears and tongues with sharp, black thorns. Having sprinkled their blood on the fire, they went out again and threw blood towards the sky with their thumbnails; then sprinkled it four times to the east, four to the west, four to the north and four to the south. This done, they came back to the fire and offered it sacred papers sprinkled with their blood mixed with white copal-incense, while the host addressed the Fire in these terms (afterwards repeated by all the men present): "Live many years, oh noble Lord, Sir Tlalxiteuticatl Nauhiotecatl. I pray you receive this offer and forgive me if I have offended you in any way." All watched the way the paper burned with anxious eyes, for if it gave forth smoke and not clear flames, they took it as a bad omen for their journey. This is exactly what happened then. Tozan, the merchant who had acquired Long Face, wondered whether it meant that he was to lose his newly acquired slave. He grew nervous and could not rest at the thought

of it. There were still important ceremonies to go through and he could not absent himself to make sure Long Face would not run away. It was silly of him to have trusted to pulque and to Wart to keep the slave safely till he returned. Fortunately, every one had been thrown into an introspective mood by the reluctance of the holy papers to burn quickly and brightly, and no one seemed to notice Tozan's concern. When he was on the point of yielding to the temptation of running away to put his new slave into stocks, he saw a figure in the patio, whose features, lit by the trembling flames of the outside fire, seemed familiar to him. He stole out. Wart, the innkeeper, drew close to him.

"There is trouble," he whispered. "He is awake and weeping. He says he is one of the King's oarsmen."

Tozan was taken aback. A King's servant! Anything might happen to them all. Should he give up his prey? That thought was abhorrent to him. He paused. Presently his small eyes smiled with a mean satisfaction.

"That's all right. He was drunk. We have witnesses. Being drunk, he was liable to death. He is not seventy yet, eh?" he asked humorously. Tzocaca the Wart knew well that no one was allowed to get drunk, under pain of death, unless he or she were above seventy years of age. "I've heard that before," he said, "but how does it apply to him? The point is not that he was drunk, but that you have bought a King's man." "Just explain to him," retorted Tozan with self-assurance, "that we leave within four hours and that it is his only chance of escaping the executioner's bludgeon. That will dry up his tears. And we'll soon be gone any how." Tzocaca was moving away, scratching his head, still doubting. "In any case," added Tozan, "put him in the stocks till I come back."

The sly merchant returned to his ceremonies somewhat reassured. So far, he had beaten the omens of the holy paper.

Citlali meanwhile was spending her last night in this world. Her state of mind bore little resemblance to that in which a modern woman (or man) of little faith and much attachment to life would have been in similar circumstances. Nor was it more akin to that of a spiritual person for whom death is but deliverance from this too solid flesh. She was travelling from a material world full of men and women, of animals, plants and ghosts and apparitions, to one equally material, populated by exactly the same creatures of nature or of fancy. She was going to catch up with fifty of her companions who had left just before her, and with the Queen herself and the Queen's brown dog. The departure

would indeed be painful, no doubt more painful to imagine than to undergo. She endeavoured to brush the thought of it from her mind every time it recurred. She kept busy. There was a lot to be done. She had put a copper cauldron on the fire to heat water for her bath, for she was required to leave with a clean body. She scrupulously washed herself and even rubbed her body with odorous plants. While thus engaged, her thoughts wandered to Long Face. Where was he? He said he would come back soon. "No doubt," she thought, "he keeps away for fear of approaching me while I am under the evil shadow of death." Perhaps he had gone again to consult the tonalpouhque. She stepped out of the round earth tub in which she had been standing and rubbed herself dry with a rough towel of henequen. Her skin almost sparkled with dry tension. She was young, comely and well made, and the terseness of her surface and the fullness of her volumes were further enhanced by the metallic quality of the colour of her skin.

She sat on her towel and had fallen into a dreamy trance, her eyes lost in apparent contemplation of a small image of carved wood which stood on a ledge of the wall. It was a small statue, about six inches high, of Tlaculteutl, the Aztec Venus, goddess of carnal love. She stood, black and self-centred, between "Seven-Serpents" or Chicomecoatl, goddess of food and Vitzociuatl, goddess of salt, to both of whom she owed so much. Citlali was a devotee of the powerful trio of the Aztec Olympus, and the three images, black the first, red the second, blue-green the third, took pride of place in her simple, humble but neat and clean home.

She was dreaming of all she owed the three goddesses—the tasty hot foods and the no less tasty, no less hot embraces of Long Face. Gone. All gone now. Perhaps if Long Face were to turn up, she might still enjoy a last offering to Tlaculteutl, there on the family mat, close to the metatl which symbolised the home. Perhaps. But time went by and he did not return. Through the window she could already see the *mamalhoaztli*, a familiar constellation, passing beyond the corner roof of the palace. Where was he? She was not indulging in self pity. Sensible and shaped into traditional ways by the generations of habit which flowed in her patient blood, she was ready to go and meet the Queen as one who changes her abode, but not her service. In a little while, she would rise, collect her symbolical and her sacred belongings and throw them into the lagoon—ready to cross over to the beyond where the Queen and her companion servants awaited her.

Three-Reeds was standing on the threshold.

"Citlali."

With a jerk, she came back from her dream.

"Yes, sir."

"You are not accepted. I have done my best. But the priest won't have you with that mutilated lock."

Her starry eyes grew bigger as she stared at him, trying to drink in the full substance of his words. But she had lost all interest for Three-Reeds, who, without a word, vanished from her sight. "Long Face," she thought, "must have gone to the tonalpouhque again. Poor boy! It must have cost him all the cocoa-almonds which remained."

And she cast her eyes on Seven Serpents, Goddess of Maintenance, with an expression of anxious wonder.

19

Long Face slept soundly in the garden of the Wart. The cool air laden with humid vapours which rose from the lagoon was slowly absorbing the heady spirits which had overwhelmed him. The first glimmers of his mental dawn pierced through his inner night before those of the morning through the night of nature, and the stars still reigned supreme in the deep blue skies when he grunted, then gave a jerk and lo! he found he could not move. A hand as rough as a maguey leaf rope held his throat in its grasp, while another as rigid as a pole held his head down to the ground. He lay still and looked around. He was alone. He touched his neck and the back of his head and he realised that he was tied to the stocks. "What have I done?" he asked himself, relating the stocks to the punishment of a crime. Then he remembered, he was a slave.

Well, what of it? A man may be a slave and yet a free man for all that, he thought proudly. Curiously enough, this proud thought did not in the least remove that anxious feeling in the pit of his stomach which he had felt ever since he had wakened up. He looked at the stars. He was not familiar enough with their position with regard to that garden and to its landmarks—trees and roof corners—to be accurate about the time, but seeing the tufts of mist that rose from the unseen lake, he guessed that dawn was not far off. The time for ghosts, he thought, and particularly for those that tell of recent deaths or announce deaths that are coming. Then he thought of Citlali, and this thought sank into his body and met that anxiety which welled up from the pit of his stomach. It all made him horribly sick in his heart.

He lay looking at the stars with his eyes and at Citlali's death with his desolate soul. What was the good of being free after she was gone? By now she was already queueing up for the sacrifice in the teocalli or temple of Witchilopochtli, clean and bathed and clad in

funeral paper. Gone ! Never again would he hold in his hands and arms that young body more graceful than any wave in the lagoon and more ardent than any flame on the hearth. Gone ! He was glad to be a slave and gladder still to know that in a few hours he would leave for ever the land in which her ashes would remain. Who knows ? If she died soon, he might still meet her ghost on the road ! . . . It was precisely the hour of ghosts.

A ghost was standing before him. He tried to rise but was held back by the long pole of the stocks.

"Rather uncomfortable, eh ?" asked the Wart with a broad smile. "You must get ready, for I am to take you to where Tozan, your master, awaits you."

"Tozan ? Is that his name ?"

"Tozan, yes, the Mole. He burrows well but always hides his pile."

With Tzocaca's help the slave rose to his feet, and presently both were threading their way through the town. The night women had retired to their lairs leaving dark corners to the dawn ghosts.

20

Citlali woke up feeling a dull pain in her back and neck. She had gone to sleep, sitting on the hearth matting, with her knees under her chin, and her arms round her ankles. A shiver ran down her back. She breathed in the fresh, humid air which blew in through the open door. It was still dark. She went to the door and looked at the skies. "Dawn is just round the corner," she thought. Where could her man be ? She had only one clue : the tonalpouhque ; and although he could only have gone there at the beginning of the night, she made up her mind to go there and see for herself. Perhaps a ghost might have kidnapped him. The forest was so close ! . . . And he would now be lying helpless in some thicket waiting for someone to come and break the spell. Then she remembered that about a stone's throw away from the tonalpouhque's hut, on the edge of the forest, there was a fountain of fresh delicious water which he loved to drink. She would go with a jar and bring some home. If he was alive, this would suffice to bring him back. If he was dead, she was sure to meet his ghost somewhere, for this was the hour of ghosts.

21

An ashy light lit the air faintly, as it were from the inside. Long Face walked jerkily, still unused to the pole which held his back stiff,

tied as it was to his neck and waist. The Wart walked behind him in silence. As he turned the corner of the market-place into the main street leading to the palace, Long Face suddenly stopped dead: Citlali was walking towards him with an earthenware jar on her head, *the* jar he knew well, with the nopal and serpent design. She walked three steps towards him without looking at him, as if she were in a dream, then saw him, stood motionless for a while and ran away down a side street. "Poor Citlali," he thought. "Dead already." He looked at the stars. "They must have put forward the hour of the sacrifice," he thought. "What is it?" asked the Wart who saw him standing, trembling still, muttering incantations to himself. "Citlali!" he said. The Wart thought he was talking of some star in the sky and looked up. "My wife, Star. Dead! . . . Seen her ghost . . ."

"Let us hurry up," grunted Wart, for like many a cynic he was terribly afraid of otherworldly visitations.

22

Citlali stopped for breath, laid the jar on the ground and pressed her thumping heart with her hands. She looked round for a seat as she felt she would not be able to stand on her feet for long. There was a low stone wall a few paces away, in the dark street of wealthy houses into which she had run for refuge. She dragged herself there, sat down and gave herself to thought. "It was his ghost. I am sure. At first I did not recognise him, because of the strained way in which he held his head, so stiff, as if he were tied to a pole. But there was no mistaking his long face and his wide chest and his strong arms and the look in his eyes . . . Dead! . . . Why and how, I wonder! . . . Dead! . . . Now that I am to live? . . ." The thought was more than she could bear at that early hour after a night of so many emotions. "Perhaps he is not dead, after all. I may have made a mistake, or possibly some ghosts may look like people who are not actually dead but under a spell from them. I must hurry to the wood by the tonalpouhque." She waited a while, picked up her jar and walked on, but by another way.

23

The merchants meanwhile had concluded their parting ceremonies. They had thrown into the outer fire all their offerings to their several gods and carefully put together the ashes without polluting them with other ashes or with any earth on the ground, burying them solemnly in a hole dug in the patio. Then, at the request of their host, they

passed into another yard where on the right twenty copper jars and basins were aligned for the Pochteca or rich merchants and on the left twenty earthenware jars and basins for the naaoaloztomeca. They washed their hands and mouths and then passed on to the dining-room for a meal of hens and chilli, followed by cold frothy cocoa and tobacco reeds. The host presided having on his right the Pochteca merchants and on his left naaoaloztomeca and at the end of the meal he addressed them in an oration full of platitudinous utterances and good wishes.

All was now ready for the departure of the caravan. Each merchant loaded his carriers and slaves, neatly packing the loads into the *cacaztls*, wooden frames which were carried on the back hanging from the forehead by ropes attached to a leather band. Long Face marched in a file of twenty carriers who conveyed Tozan's goods. As they passed the door, every man, poor or rich, carrier or merchant, took a handful of copal incense from a green cup standing on a stone pillar by the gate and cast the aromatic grains on a huge fire which burnt outside. Then they all left, without looking back or speaking a word to those who remained, for a word or a glance backwards spelt disaster to the expedition.

24

Citlali walked cautiously up the path which led to the hut. She had no reason for thinking the tonalpouhque would be awake at this late—or early—hour, yet never for a moment did she imagine him otherwise than up and about. The door was open. She stood on the threshold. An acrid smell of burnt rubber, with a dash of copal incense, struck her nostrils. There was a small flame flickering on the hearth and a sheet of paper, half-burnt, had been blown away on the earthen ground.

"What do you want?" asked a peremptory voice. She saw no one, but then it was fully within a tonalpouhque's powers to see without being seen.

"I . . . I came about my husband," she said in a singing, clear voice.

"What about him?" It seemed to her the voice came from an inner room—which was indeed the case—but she cast this impious explanation out of her mind and answered up into space: "Has he not come to see you to-day?"

"No."

"He came yesterday."

Now, the tonalpouhque knew all he needed in order to be omniscient. "Yes," he said, "and he saved your life."

"Tell me where he is."

"He is in danger of death," answered the tonalpouhque, knowing full well all men are at all times.

"Not dead yet?" asked the anxious voice.

"That cannot be answered without consulting the gods. And they must have an offering."

Citlali had nothing to offer. She was anxious to know more, but she knew already that Long Face had not been there. This puzzled her, because she was now unable to find a reason for her release from death; evidently, the ill omen implied in the visit from the skunk had not been lifted by the tonalpouhque. Yet, she was alive. Therefore, concluded her lucid brain, the ill omen had not been meant for her. But since the skunk had actually stood on her own threshold, it was meant for a member of that house, therefore, it was meant for Long Face himself—therefore Long Face was dead and it was his ghost she had seen.

With slow steps she climbed the hill towards the fountain and filled the jar with the fresh water which ran out from the dark recesses of the earth into the light of dawn. She sat there for a while, listening to the warbling of the water. "How sweet," she thought, "is the voice of Chalchiuhtlycue, Glow-of-Jade, goddess of the water!" With slow steps she walked down again towards her empty hearth. On the road below, a caravan of merchants was filing past towards Chalco and the eastern passes. She stopped, her jar resting on her hip, to watch the merchants walking with their black staves in hand, and the carriers plodding along with their loads on their patient backs.

Suddenly, above the teocalli to the west, a column of white smoke rose in the sky, and the sun, piercing the thin veil which hung on the hills, struck it with its rays. Citlali stood motionless, beholding the smoke in which she might have been rising towards the sky along with the other victims who were at that moment being sent to join their departed mistress. Long Face, plodding along in the file of carriers of the caravan, saw the sun's disk illumine the two volcanoes. He thought of Three-Reed's words: "The ceremony will be at dawn," and looked back. "Beast!" growled Tozan, and his black staff fell heavily on the slave's head. Long Face remembered the curse on those who glanced back on the first morning of the merchants' march. He walked on. And then, as he turned a bend of the rising road, he saw the ghost of his wife, white and ethereal on the blue canopy of heaven, while he, still on the earth, sadly and slowly, plodded on, along the path below, with his burden on his back, towards his still long destiny.

PART II

DON RODRIGO MANRIQUE HAS A SON

I

WHEN Don Rodrigo Manrique was told that his wife had given him a son, he fell on his knees and thanked the Lord for this undeserved favour. He had never altogether disagreed with those elder members of his family who held that he had defiled one of the most illustrious names in Spain by marrying the daughter of a rabbi, even though they all believed, and chose to forget, that once baptised, a Jew ceased to be a Jew.

Don Rodrigo Manrique was a scion of one of the many junior branches of the Manrique family. It was one of the noblest families in Spain, many times allied by marriage to the royal house of Castille and closely related to the houses of Guzmán, Mendoza and others which had given Spain most of her greatest men in arms, letters and statesmanship. He was proud enough of it, but his fierce individualism did not allow him to show it overmuch, and he lived a comfortable, out of the way, sort of life, in his native Torremala, unable for a time to share in the King's wars since he had broken his right leg in a skirmish against the Moors, under the very eyes of King Ferdinand. He would have given both legs for a horse and a spear in the siege of Granada which Ferdinand had been relentlessly pressing closer and closer to the lovely city for many a month, but even as he felt that wish Granada had fallen to King Ferdinand on the very day his son had been born, January first, 1492. "We shall call him Manuel, in honour of the Lord who gave him to me," he said as he rose to his feet, and Suárez, his steward, who had also been wounded in the Moorish wars, acquiesced with his heavy head. "How is the lady?" asked Manrique. "Longing to see Your Mercy," answered the steward. And the two men left the room.

Manrique was a tall, lithe, powerful man, looking as much like the conventional idea of a Moor as a man can ever look. He had bright black eyes and dazzling white teeth, a black beard, an aquiline nose and a fine forehead. His Visigothic blood came out only in his commanding step and arrogant mien. The streak of dissident behaviour which had led him to marry a Jewess in the teeth of most of the members of his family seemed to be a permanent feature in his branch of the Manriques, for his grandfather, another Rodrigo like him, sent

by the King of Castille to Granada on some diplomatic mission, had brought back the daughter of a Grand Vizier, who had accepted the law of Christ in order to marry the handsome Christian just as she would have accepted the law of Buddha if he had been a Buddhist. Our Rodrigo owed his Moorish looks—and a good deal more that did not meet the eye—to this lovely grandmother from Islam. He had inherited his estate when not yet twenty, on the death of his father in the Moorish wars and had found himself a handsome cavalier, well off without being a potentate, with a good horse and a spear, a fair handful of men ready to fight under his banner in the King's holy wars and an austere and energetic mother to guide his first steps in life. He fought for years till he had to be rescued from under his horse with a broken leg which disabled him and forced him to return home. Then Salomé appeared.

She was the daughter of Samuel ha-Levy, the rabbi of the small but prosperous colony of Jews in Torremala whose chief source of revenue was the trade in raw wool from the rich merinos of the vicinity and of silk from the town's looms which they shipped to Flanders in exchange for a variety of goods, chiefly woollens and linen for the households of the well-to-do. Samuel ha-Levy lived in the Jewry with his daughter Salomé, golden-haired, blue-eyed, as fresh as a rose. She was keen and handsome and her father had educated her with pride and joy, teaching her the history of both her native people and her adopted fatherland, and the two languages—Hebrew and Latin—in which it could be studied. She used to listen to the friendly discussions which her father often held with Father Guzmán, the learned prior of the Jeromite monastery on the Moor's Hill or Cerro del Moro, and her presence, her grace, her tact and her keenness on the subject (the respective merits and permanent value of the Jewish and the Christian faiths) were so much valued by both men that when they met, as was often the case, not in her father's study in the Jewry, but in the Prior's cell, at the monastery, she was especially invited by Father Guzmán to accompany the rabbi. The Prior was no less attractive a person than the rabbi. He was just as delicately modelled by the spirit, and his eyes, his voice, his very movements suggested one for whom nothing but truth and charity are worth a man's breath. The upshot of it all was that Salomé made up her mind that the New Testament conveyed a higher message than the Old and she was baptised by Father Guzmán.

Her father bowed to the inevitable with a desolate heart. Salomé left the Jewry and became Isabel Santamaria. Rodrigo's mother was her godmother at the christening, and housed her in the family house, having-promised Father Guzmán that she would stand as a mother to the new Christian until she found a husband.

All this happened while young Rodrigo was at the wars. When he arrived home, lying helpless on an ox-cart with his broken leg, the golden-haired and blue-eyed beauty was by his mother's side at the door of the small castle on top of the hill. He had eyes for nothing else and the very day of his arrival told his mother that it was his settled intention to marry Isabel Santamaría. All the family was up in arms, for despite the Pope and his Cardinals, a Jewess might be christened, but she was a Jewess all the same. Rodrigo held good and married her, not because he disagreed with his family—far from it—but because he loved the girl. He loved her the more for being the cause of the breach with most of his illustrious relatives. "What a wonderful person she is to have such power!" he seemed to think of her.

She *was* wonderful. Wise and lovely, earnest and gay. Her conversion had come from the depths of her soul and she was most devout. When Rodrigo entered the room where she lay, she was enjoying that happiest of moments in a woman's life, when she begins the acquaintance of the new being she has brought into the world. It was their first born. "I will call him Manuel," he said in an overstrained, masculine voice, refusing to be betrayed into any show of tenderness. "He will be a knight." "We shall see!" said Isabel, flooded with her golden splendour which made an aureole of religious light round the little baby, lying like an infant Jesus on her breast.

2

The child was barely two weeks when the news of the fall of Granada reached Torremala. The church bells went mad with joy and the waves of irresponsible exhilaration which they set moving soon stirred the whole town. The news had been expected for so long, desired for so long, that men and women spoke no longer about the matter, trusting that the Lord some day would grant them their dearest wish. Here it was. People embraced each other, shouted and wept. The church was filled with worshippers. The parish priest made an impassioned sermon. It was improvised and showed it. He reminded the faithful how the Infidels had been in Spain for seven centuries and how at last the Cross had been raised on top of the Alhambra. "Our sins," he said, "our sins alone can explain why the Lord allowed it for so long, why He permitted an occupation of His territory by the obdurate Infidel for seven hundred years. The task is not over. There are still other Infidels in our midst. They also must be brought over to the fold or driven out of our Christian land."

There, in the first row of the faithful, was Isabel Santamaría, one time Salomé ha-Levi. She thought of her father, of the lovely house in the Jewry, with its stone arched portico, its cool patios, its kitchen-garden gently sloping towards the river, its terrace so cool and spacious in the starry summer nights—the world in which the old rabbi had lived and grown up as his father and grandfathers had done for generations, scholars, leaders of religion and learning, steeped in the environment of Hebraic culture, so that all, from father to son, looked like patriarchs straight from the Old Testament, with their long, clear-chiselled noses, lofty foreheads, flowing beards, which seemed to prolong the lines of their hollow cheeks. . . .

Isabel knew that the movement against her people was gathering momentum in the country and that, sooner or later, the storm would break over the heads of the unhappy Jews. The words of the priest came to remind her of the indelible difference which separated her from the "old" Christian stock, in spite of her conversion, in spite of her marriage. She left the church with her husband, sad and depressed, outwardly the chief lady of that community, inwardly a pariah. As they walked slowly towards the castle which crowned the small hill at the head of the long avenue, on which were aligned most of the houses of the well-to-do gentlemen and peasants, she overheard a rough, heinous voice from a group: "And the converted ones too, they also must go, they.—" She heard no more. The aggressive accent was, she knew, meant for her, so that she could hear it and take it in. She said nothing to her husband, who walked silently by her side, no doubt immersed in similar thoughts, so self-absorbed that he failed at times to respond to the deferent bows of his neighbours. She felt the pang of the insult and of the threat, and beneath it all, a kind of curiosity about the voice which had uttered the offensive words. "I know that voice!" she said to herself. She was too proud to look back. Another voice struck her then, one she knew well: "You shall do nothing of the kind, for it would not be worthy of a good Christian," said Father Guzmán, the Prior of the monastery of St. Jerome, and the first voice again, the one which had insulted her: "I will do what I think best for the service of the Lord." Her husband stopped and turned back. "Good Father!" he said. She looked round quickly. The Friar's interlocutor had turned away abruptly. She recognised the oily head and the squirming gait of Esquivel.

3

He was a Jew, born and bred in Ronda under the Moorish sway, and married there to a Jewess. They were Castilian speaking Jews.

and when King Ferdinand took Ronda from the Moors in 1485, Esquivel and his wife had paraded as Christian captives (loaded with self-imposed chains) in order to benefit from the King's bounty to all the Christian captives who wished to return home. It was of course impossible for them to remain in Ronda without being found out, so they had left the town northwards, having bought an ass with the King's alms and loaded it with every sword, helmet and buckler they had been able to lay hands on during the days which followed the siege. This booty was the basis of their stock-in-trade, and after a number of adventures, not all to the taste of the Queen's alguacils, they had settled in Torremala, where Esquivel bought and sold weapons, repaired them, lent money on them and if necessary stole them, for trade is a most complex activity and implies operations of various kinds.

In Torremala, Esquivel was the leader of the anti-Jewish faction. He was against all Jews, baptised or not, and would have the latter expelled and the former burnt. He used to harangue every group, big or small, which lent itself to his oratory, fanning the fire of their passions and prejudices against the people from which he sprang. He was soon able to detect a difference in his success according to his audience. The soldiers and ex-soldiers who came with rusty sword and dented buckler to the weapon-shop under the arches in the avenue, were apt to frown at his harangues. They were the direct descendants of the men who had fought against the Moors (often with money borrowed from the Jews) and like most good fighters, were inclined to respect all men, no matter their colour or creed. But when down in the dark back-shop by the lane which ran down towards the river and became a brook itself in the rainy season, he spoke to the peasants who brought him scythes and ploughshares to repair, enlarging on the grasping ways of the Jews and how they were all usurers, Esquivel knew he was sowing on ready ground. It was then that his eloquence was sharpest and that his eyes shone under his bushy brows like two more sparks from his forge, while with a sharp scythe in his hands, his fingers on the murderous edge, smiling with a sinister smile through the double file of his serried white teeth, he would scream at the bewildered peasants: "Death! Death is the remedy for such usurers and bloodsuckers!"

"How many of you owe money to Isaac Avel?" The sturdy, simple faces tried to look unconcerned but failed, and they frowned, lit up by the quivering fire of the forge, fuming at the thought of their never-quenched, ever-rising debts to the flint-hearted usurer by the bridge. "Do you think any one of you will ever see the end of his debt? Never. For every maravedí you pay him you will have to borrow three. And it will mount into ducats, until you lose your land

and your house. Death, death is the only remedy ! ” he would repeat with a murderous leer, as he passed his fingers along the steely edge of the scythe.

4

One dark night, after a whole afternoon of busy sowing of those deadly seeds, Esquivel left his house by the lane door and, with the help of a lantern, which he used sparingly, he stole down to the river and followed the bank along the sandy shore till he came to within a few yards of the bridge. “ The dog ! ” he exclaimed between his teeth as he stood hiding behind a bush of rushes, while a shadow ran up the bank and disappeared among the dark blocks above. “ The dog ! I bet it was Isaac in person. I recognised his long frock and his round, greasy cap. I wonder what he was up to there at this hour of the night.” He stepped forward cautiously, looking out for pools in the sand, till he stood at the foot of the bridge. Isaac’s house was close to it, with one frontage on the bridge level and the other on a backyard-below, which ran steeply down to the water. Esquivel was then standing on the edge of Isaac’s backyard, trying hard to penetrate the darkness to detect any sign of the old miser’s activities above. He moved up the gravel patch which separated him from the house, with cautious steps and wary eyes, when a candle was lit in the house and at the same time he fell into a ditch. He stifled a groan and sat back to nurse his knees with his hands. “ A miracle I did not break my bones,” he thought. “ I wonder why this old miser made a hole here . . . Hum. To hide his treasure, I’ll bet ! ” This idea brightened him up and relieved the ill-humour into which his fall had thrown him. “ It as a good thing I fell,” he thought, still rubbing his sore knees, “ or else he might have seen me.” Gradually, as quickly as caution and pain allowed, he rose and peeped over the edge of his trench. Isaac was moving about in his house, candle in hand ; and his shaking, tottering shadow passed now here now there, not just wandering like a soul in purgatory, but busy and intent on some steady purpose. Esquivel noticed that while his left hand held the trembling candle—or was it an oil-lamp?—his right hand now hung along his body, dragging it down, now seemed to hug his stomach, while every journey ended in the ground floor with a deep and long bow as before an image. He came to the conclusion that Isaac was filling some coffer with valuables—which was indeed the case. “ Ah,” he cried out, and he put his hand over his mouth. Isaac was coming towards the window. He looked out suspiciously into the dark night and Esquivel thought : “ I wonder whether he has seen me. I see

the game. He is going to put his valuables in a coffer which he will bury in this hole and, should he have to go away, for I'm sure it will all end in a wholesale expulsion . . . I wonder . . . perhaps he has got wind of it already . . . then, of course, he would find his coffer here later . . . unless I have found it before him ! ” He chuckled in his black hole while Isaac went to and fro again, busy with his precious trinkets. Esquivel crawled out of the hole and across the yard and, feeling his way between Isaac's house and the next, passed on to the street, reached the bridge and boldly knocked at the miser's door.

The old man was shaken out of his solitary peace by the loud knock, and the candle fell from his trembling hand. He was on the ground floor. In the dark, he felt for the stairs, went up to his bedroom, opened the window and asked, “ Who is there ? ” “ Open to me, Isaac,” answered Esquivel cheerfully. “ I am Esquivel, your friend.” “ My friend ? Were you my friend, you would pay me what you owe me ! ” chanted the old man querulously. This pointed answer struck a light in Esquivel's mind. “ I come to pay you,” he said with an assertive voice. The poor old man swallowed the bait at once and ran downstairs quicker than his years might have led one to expect, muttering “ Oh ! If that is your errand ! ” He lit the candle and went through the many laborious and noisy operations—removal of bars, turning of keys, sliding of bolts—which he had to perform before his door could be opened. “ Come in, come in ! ” The light of the candle added a tremor of its own to the shaking of his frail frame as it illumined his thin, undernourished face, hollow beneath his round, small eyes, between which his sharp crooked nose looked like the beak of some bird of prey ; he had a grey moustache and a grey thin comma of a beard which reiterated on his chin the crooked pattern of his nose. He was wearing a greasy, old, round cap, from under which his grey locks flowed over the collar of his long, fly-coloured frock which fell in a sheer drop from his bony shoulders to his feet. His hand held the candle tight with long crooked fingers prolonged by long crooked nails, not very clean. “ Come in, come in ! ”

Esquivel walked in and Isaac shut the door again bolt after bolt, bar after bar, lock after lock. Then he turned round and noticed that his guest wore a sword at his side, hanging from a baldric, and a dagger as well at his belt. He was frightened. “ What do you want of me ? ” he asked in a voice broken with fear. “ Come,” said Esquivel quietly, yet with a humorous grin which Isaac did not think of very good omen. “ Come, old man. Let us have a good talk. Lead the way.” “ You go first, said Isaac, still mortally frightened, and he raised the light so that his guest should see where he was treading. “ No. Come this way,” he said, changing his mind, for he suddenly

remembered the coffer still open in the dining-room. "We shall be cosier in the kitchen."

"Where is the money?" he asked as soon as both had sat down. Esquivel looked around. There was not a vestige of food to be seen in that kitchen. "I wonder what he eats!" he thought; then, aloud: "Money? What money?" "Didn't you say you were calling to pay your debt? . . . What do you want of me?" he asked again, trembling with fear. "I've paid you several times over, you thief! The Moorish sword I gave you for your last interest was worth twice the principal!" "Indeed, it was not!" "Look here, Isaac, I haven't come to waste my time. I bring you something which is worth more than money. I bring you a warning that your life is in danger . . . and that I can save it."

The old man was overcome with fear. "Who wants to kill me?"

"No one in particular, I'm sure," answered Esquivel, "for no one wants to be hanged by Don Rodrigo's hangman for your sake. But you have made too many friends . . . Too many people see in your death the only remedy for their indebtedness. And any day, that cloud might burst on your head." Isaac was reassured. "Oh! . . . Any day!" His small round eyes smiled with incredulity. "How about to-morrow?" asked Esquivel pointedly. The old man was startled and his goatee trembled on his chin. "To-morrow?" he squealed, "Why to-morrow?" "Don't know. Just an idea," dropped Esquivel. And before Isaac had had time to smile again, he added poisonously, "I may have heard something . . ." The small round eyes were fastened on him, half searching, half imploring. "Cards on the table," said Esquivel, turning round with a sudden movement. He had been sitting sideways, one elbow on the table between them. He sat squarely, seized the edge of the table with both hands and, head low, glancing upwards at his victim, he shot at him: "Isaac, unless I get three hundred ducats right now, you will be mobbed to-morrow!"

The goatee shook more madly than ever and the few teeth remaining in the miser's mouth chattered audibly. "Three hundred ducats! But . . . but . . . I haven't got them . . . To-morrow? . . . Mobbed! . . . Why! . . . Three hun—" Esquivel made up his mind to storm the fort. He sprang to his feet, drew his dirk and shouted: "Out with the money, you miserable Jew!" To his utter bewilderment, Isaac took this scene most coolly and, without showing any fear, answered quietly, "Very well. You shall have them." "Now!" shouted Esquivel. "Now," said Isaac in a voice which seemed to Esquivel tainted with resignation.

Isaac had spent many a sleepless night thinking of ways and means to defend his precious wealth against robbers and thieves. This

situation was one he had foreseen and carefully provided for, though not till he felt the edge of instant danger did he remember the fact—thus recovering his serenity. He disappeared into the dining-room, leaving the light in the kitchen, and presently returned with a leather purse and a pair of scales. He weighed the gold coins and, with a well imitated sigh, he gave them to his exacting guest. Esquivel tied them up inside a red and yellow silk herchief. Then Isaac asked, "How do I know that you will stop that mobbing?" "I give you my word of honour!" Isaac seemed to accept that—the poorest security he would ever have accepted; but success and the sight of gold had gone to Esquivel's head. The old man rose to his feet again: "Is it true that you will answer for my life?" "I swear it!" said Esquivel firmly, hugging his purse. "True?" Esquivel slightly angry, retorted: "Have I not given you my word? Why so much asking?" "Because," explained Isaac with a smile which showed his broken black teeth, "I have a wine here, so expensive . . . I would not dream of opening a bottle unless the occasion was worthy of it." "This is the time for it," said Esquivel. Isaac opened a cupboard with one of the many keys which hung from his waist under his frock, and produced a dusty bottle of wine; he uncorked it and poured wine into two glasses. But Esquivel was not then in a mood to realise that one of the two glasses contained the powder which, within a few minutes threw him into a profound sleep. The old man stood looking at him as he fell helpless to the floor. With trembling hands he took back the money; he then dragged the inert body towards the door and laid a candle on the ground to undo his bolts and bars. Not till then did he notice that Esquivel's boots were muddy with sandy mud from the river side and that his knees were white with lime. "Hallo," he thought, "He had fallen into my treasure grave." Within a few minutes, Esquivel was snoring in the gutter outside and Isaac, in his dining-room, with his candle burning steadily on the table, was ruminating over the consequences which this dramatic scene might have for him.

5

"Now," he thought, "he will come to curse me and lead the mob against me. That is certain." He brooded over this gloomy thought. "Can't help it. No good keeping him here. He would have overpowered me. Let us see what happens." Isaac had an excellent intelligence service, for he was a speculator as well as a moneylender. He knew—he was possibly the only man to know it yet in Torremala—that the King and Queen had made up their minds to expel the Jews,

and he had taken some wise measures to acquire foreign exchange, in case, as he surmised, the Jews were allowed to export commercial paper. But he knew that most of his wealth would have to stay behind. He had been developing his plans for the last fortnight, working hard in the quiet of the night. There was a spot which no one ever visited day or night : the space under the bridge, between the first pier, which sprang from dry soil, and the water.. There, the industrious miser had built up a chamber which he kept covered with wooden planks by day.

He had put out his candle, to save tallow, and in the dark was thinking out the last stages of his plan. He realised that his life was in danger and that the next day might be his last. It was therefore imperative that all that remained to be done should be done during that night. That miser, chained to gold all his life, was considering parting with his fortune for good and all with an equable soul. "What a marvellous mystery!" he thought. And there, alone; in the dark, he mused over it, feeling a kind of austere happiness fill his soul and melt its stony substance. This he owed to Salomé ha-Levy. Isaac Avel would never forget—no, not even in heaven—the day when he had first seen her. She was a girl of seventeen and he was an old, shrivelled-up man, whose very soul had become metallic. His eyes were no doubt attracted to her by the golden hue of her glorious hair—worth how many ducats? If it only had been actual gold! That, he remembered, had been his first thought. She was walking in front of him like a vision from Heaven, and not till she vanished inside her house did the old withered soul realise that he had followed her out of his course, under a strange, indefinable spell. He was left there, facing the rabbi's door, open-mouthed and nonplussed, dreaming about the lovely vision and wondering about himself. One feeling flooded his soul, dry till that June morning—gratitude. He was grateful to her. He did not know why. With sad, slow steps, he moved towards his home. Why was he sad? He did not know either. Nothing had changed in his life. Nothing changed thereafter. He remained the same heartless skinflint of a usurer, exacting the last drop of value out of every man or woman driven by hard fate to pass his threshold and to come within distance of his grasping claws. But there was Salomé. He was like an old house, dusty and miserable, in which, after generations, a window had been opened out on to a luminous garden. That home was just as dusty, just as miserable as of old—but there was that window. Isaac dreamt of the lovely girl, and tried to come across her in the street. That was all. Her mere presence said to him that all the ducats, gold-chains and precious stones which he had been coveting, securing, guarding and caressing for the best part of his seventy years were but dead matter, while there was beauty,

colour, movement, aroma and the glory of God in that flower which was Salomé. On the way home, the day he had seen Salomé for the first time, he saw a garden which he had passed every day of his life but had never seen before. He was struck by a full blown rose which dangled outside the iron railing, over his path. He stopped to look at it, and while beholding its beauty with the fresh eyes of a man who had never looked at a rose before, he kept thinking of Salomé. He moved on, muttering to himself: "She is like the rabbi's daughter." "She" was the rose.

That night, in the dark, while Esquivel snored outside in the gutter, old Isaac felt inwardly flooded by the pure light of these memories. His gratitude to Salomé had never abated—rather had it increased with the years. Her conversion had made no difference to one like him whose only God was wealth. But now, on the eve of his departure from Spain, and possibly from life, this gratitude, the only positive human emotion he had ever felt—and how deeply he enjoyed it!—lived in his soul stronger than ever and enabled him not only to bear the idea of parting with his wealth, but even to prepare all the details of that parting with a strange, ineffable joy which he himself could not understand. He was determined to leave things so arranged that if he died or were unable to return to Spain, all that wealth should go to Salomé ha-Levy, now Isabel Manrique.

He moved to the window to find out the time by the stars. He did not keep a time-candle, for the sake of economy. He was well satisfied with his observations of the sky: there was still enough night left for all he wanted to do. He went upstairs in the dark, and, with his subtle fingers well trained for night work, found a lantern; he came down to the kitchen, shook the lantern several times, made up his mind that there was enough oil in it, went back to the dining-room and, after closing the shutters, lit a candle and set to work.

He had prepared three small coffers, about one foot long, eight inches wide and one foot deep, made of iron lined with lead, and provided with strong locks. In one of these coffers, he carefully and lovingly placed pile after pile of golden coins—mostly golden *enriques*, but also many florins of Aragón, "castillians," Italian ducats and a variety of other currencies. It was a fortune amassed over years of usury and speculation. He handled it with pride and affection. When the coffer was full, he closed it and was going to lock it when, unable to resist the temptation, he opened it again to cast a long, loving glance at the lovely metal piled in it. Suddenly, he thought of Esquivel. "I wonder what he is doing out there," he thought. "I'd better go and see." He locked the treasure and shuffled out of the room, locked the door as a further precaution, went upstairs and softly, with the utmost care, he opened his bedroom window and peeped over towards the

street. In the ashy light which the stars shed gently over the night-clad town, he saw that the spot where he had left Esquivel was empty. "Humph, gone! Where to? I wonder?" He looked up and down the street. Nothing to be seen. He came down half reassured at the thought that Esquivel was no longer there, so close to his gold, half uneasy at the thought that he might have gone to prepare the final assault on his life.

He set about filling up the second coffer. This was to be the depository of his best jewels: gold necklaces, pearls, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, set in rings, in bracelets, in diadems, in brooches, all possible trinkets of fine value and rare workmanship, Christian, Jewish, Moorish, Italian, French, either loose, wrapped up in soft flannel, or in a variety of cases of leather, metal or aromatic wood. One by one, he looked at them with loving eyes, holding them under the feeble light of his candle to make them shine in all their splendour, then laid them softly in the coffer till there was room for no more. Time went by and in the quiet of the night Isaac worked on in perfect calm. The third coffer waited still open. It was set aside for things less glamorous but just as valuable, for it was to contain papers, that is facts, intentions, future motives, springs of action, life and death perhaps. Isaac laid aside it many such papers which were ready, muttering all the while, "Dirty Jew. He called me dirty Jew. What about him? We shall see who knows more about the other and who can speak to a better purpose!"

The three coffers were ready. Now to the fourth, the big one, the bait for Esquivel. It contained nothing but a Holy Sack, the yellow covering which the Inquisition made all relapsing Jews wear before leading them either to the stake or to the platform where they had to confess their sins in public. On top of this coffer, Isaac wrote in big square letters: CURSE UPON HIM WHO TRIES TO OPEN THIS. I SHALL RISE FROM DEATH TO ACCURSE HIM AND HE SHALL DIE.

Now, all was ready. He went upstairs again and made sure that Esquivel was not in sight. The night was quiet and a mantle of stillness covered the little town. With shaking hands he took the first coffer. It was heavy. He wondered how he would manage to transport it. He disliked the idea of leaving the other two coffers in the house. He then remembered that he had an old wheelbarrow somewhere in a shed. Would he venture out? Suppose Esquivel was about? Something had to be done. He opened the back door, stole out, waited with bated breath, went round to the shed, found the wheelbarrow and came back with it. He loaded it with the three coffers and sat down on one of the handshafts, exhausted, wiping the sweat of his brow with the sleeve of his dirty frock. He waited again for a while, then, encouraged by the silence, he locked his house and wheeled his treasure

down towards the arch under the bridge. He removed the planks, laid the coffers in the chambers he had prepared for them and walled them up with bricks and mortar which he again covered with the old planks.

He felt free and buoyant, and with a younger step, walked away leaving his wheelbarrow behind. He did not miss it till he turned his thought to the big trunk. "It is light," he thought, "but bulky. I'd better wheel it along too." He had to return to the bridge and push the heavy barrow uphill. He was beginning to get tired. He stuck to his task, however, and presently had the satisfaction of stamping with some glee on the grave of Esquivel's hopes, in which lay the trunk with the holy sack inside and the curse on top. But Isaac was not the man to indulge in unprofitable emotions and he returned home. He had not finished yet.

His candle was coming to an end and he was averse to begin another one. He must hasten. He chose a small, Moorish steel box and laid inside it the keys of his three valuable coffers. He then took some paper and an old quill shorn of most of its feathers, and he wrote intently, with deep satisfaction oozing out of his usually bone-dry features: "My lady: you do not know me, but I know you. I owe you the best moments which I have tasted in my life—the only ones, indeed. You do not know why and need not. But I am a grateful man. Enclosed are three keys and a paper with instructions. If you are ever in danger and need help, read the paper, use the keys and I shall rise from my dust to help you —Isaac Avel."

He left the letter open, but sealed the instructions; he put everything inside the Moorish box and hugging it tightly to his chest, went upstairs to bed. His candle had gone out but he felt full of inner light.

6

"Curse the drunkard," a gruff, angry voice barked in the night and, as Esquivel heard it, he felt the pain of a kick in his stomach as someone tripped over him in the dark and nearly fell on the sleeper in the gutter. "What are you doing there? Haven't you got a better bed?"—the man went on and walked away, grumbling and cursing, while Esquivel tried hard to recover his wits. What was he doing there? Exactly, that is what he would like to know. He tried first to find where he was and, on discovering that he had been sleeping practically on Isaac's doorstep, he immediately connected the fact with the last scene in the kitchen when he had drained most of that bottle of strong wine which had made him so drowsy from the first.

. . . He began to wonder. . . . He rose to his feet and slowly started downhill towards his house, turning his back on the bridge by which the stranger had disappeared into the night. Isaac was quite capable of having given him a poison, or at least some sleeping-drug. Suddenly he thought of the money and searched the inner pocket of his doublet with a feverish hand. No money, and the doublet unbuttoned. He cursed madly and stopped dead. He retraced his steps and cursed again : " That bastard dog will pay for it at once ! Money and life, both. Curse on him ! " He stopped dead again, standing on the spot on which he had slept for the better part of the night. " Yes, but . . . that stranger . . . suppose I came out, fell asleep, drunk as I was, and this accursed night-jay cleaned my pockets before kicking me . . . " The doubt made him pause, then move away again. " And in any case," he thought, " why take the guilt upon myself ? " He went home. He had called an early morning meeting of the hot-heads amongst the younger peasants whom he meant to lead the next day against Isaac's house, money or no money, just to teach him a lesson anyhow, and he was content to have the work done by them.

7

Isaac had a long and peaceful sleep, heavy because he had drunk wine, a most exceptional occurrence with him, and because he had worked hard. Normally he was an early riser, but that morning the sun was already flooding his bedroom and he was still asleep. From the depths of his slumber he heard a rising clamour which grew bigger and closer to him, till he woke up and found that it belonged to the realm of reality and not, as he had thought, to that of his dreams. It seemed to centre and settle somehow round his own house. Presently the crowd began to shout his name and to bang at his door : " Down with the usurer ! Death to the Jew ! " The din was uproarious and the knocks became more and more imperious. Isaac had provided for that possibility also. His night activities had simplified his task, since the only treasure now left in the house, apart from a small stock-in-trade, was the small Moorish box which he had prepared for Salomé. He pressed a button in the wainscot behind his bed and deposited the box in the closet thus opened, then shut the secret door, and prepared to go down and meet the fury of his assailants with a fatalistic courage. But his assailants gave him no time. The door with all its bolts and bars came down with a terrific crash at the onslaught of a catapult which Esquivel had provided, and the house was stormed by a motley band of armed peasants whipped into a fury by the

harangues of Esquivel. "Death to the Jew!" There was first an anticlimax. The peasants were put out by the feeling of being in someone else's house; somewhat ashamed also at the sight of the defenceless old man. But most of them had memories of his exacting, hard-hearted obduracy when they had come to him in their dire need, and the boldest and most callous of them attacked him mercilessly and threw him to the ground, beating him with the butts of their pitch-forks. Esquivel meanwhile was busy searching the house and growing more and more furious as he found it empty. He managed to put together some minor booty and had just discovered by a glance through the back-window that the ditch into which he had fallen the night before had been filled up again—with all that this discovery implied—when he was struck by the sudden silence which had fallen over the house. He guessed that the Alguacil Mayor or Chief Constable who acted on behalf of the feudal lord, Don Rodrigo, must have arrived on the scene. He came down on tiptoe, found this was the case and slipped away through the back door.

Isaac was lying on the floor of his shop, covered with blood. The Alguacil Mayor knew that Don Rodrigo held him in abomination both as an infidel and as a usurer. He pronounced a formal condemnation of the assault and a perfunctory threat of proceedings, while giving ample time for most of the men to slip away; he kept four of them; two he ordered to carry the wounded man up to his bed; he sent one to fetch the doctor and another the rabbi, and he resolved to wait till either the one or the other had come to take charge of the body or of the soul of the victim.

The rabbi was the first to arrive. "What is the matter, Sir Constable?" he asked. "You will soon see." He spoke deferentially, for every one, Christian and Jew alike, held the scholarly and good-hearted rabbi in high esteem, even before his daughter had become the lady of the town. "I will leave you now," he added, "for I must go and report the matter to Don Rodrigo. I am sorry, but it was bound to happen some day."

When the rabbi entered Isaac's bedroom the old miser was lying motionless on his bed, streams of blood pouring from several cuts on his face. Silently, ha-Levy washed the wounds, wiping them with his own spotless, linen handkerchief, for he could find no single clean piece of cloth in the whole house, and then waited till the wounded man could speak. Isaac opened his eyes and saw Salomé's father. His white face coloured slightly.

"You?" he asked. "The doctor is coming," said the rabbi. "I don't need him," whispered Isaac. "I am going. I know. Come closer to me. Here——" he murmured with hardly any voice left. "Here——" He tried to convey his meaning by gestures, but was not

able to move round to point at the secret button in the wainscot. He signalled for a pen and paper, and when the rabbi provided them he made an excellent drawing of what he meant. The rabbi succeeded in opening the secret closet and found the Moorish box which he showed to the dying man. "Give it to your daughter." "My daughter?" asked the rabbi, astonished at this unexpected request. "Yes. Don't ask. No voice to explain. Give it to your daughter. May . . . the . . . Lord . . . bless . . ."

There was no more voice left.

8

The rabbi had not seen his daughter since she had married Don Rodrigo. There was no bitterness in his heart; far from it. He loved his daughter just as much or possibly more, and was wont to think that her bold action had shown him the way, the way which his intellect refused to see because his will was sluggish and dared not face the consequences. He kept away from his daughter for her sake. He knew that Don Rodrigo had been led by his love for Salomé to a marriage highly imprudent in the circumstances, and he wished to minimise the unfortunate consequences which the situation was bound to evolve. He left the house of the dead miser with a heart full of forebodings. He knew how heavy was the score of his people owing to the all too frequent recurrence of usurers in the Jewries of Spain, and he realised that this riot which had cost Isaac his life was but one of the first sparks of the fire which was soon to burst out and consume them all. There were already rumours of a coming wholesale expulsion of the unconverted Jews, while the converted Jews had been living for years under the threat of anonymous accusations to the Inquisition as secret adherents of the Jewish faith.

What would happen to his daughter if some envious enemy chose to accuse her of secret Jewish practices? He shuddered to think of it. That box which Isaac had given him for her was a most awkward gift. It might be deadly. Much less than that had sufficed to send innocent people to the stake. The rabbi was walking along the river, which flowed peacefully full of limpid light, and he was tempted to throw the Moorish box into the all-forgiving, all-forgetting water. Yet, who could tell? And how could he disobey the voice of the dead man? He walked on along the haulage path, passing by the back hedges of pleasant gardens and rich *huertas* of the well-to-do Jews, glancing at them with eyes in which began to linger the longing light of a last farewell, a melancholy feeling of the passing of things which

harmonised with the thoughts his mind was then brewing on his daughter and Isaac and the Moorish box. He stopped and looked at a small island in the river as if he had never seen it before; but he did not see the island in the river; he saw the solution in his mind, coming out from the flow of his thoughts like the island in the river from the flowing water. He would deliver the box to Father Guzmán. He walked on more briskly, and as soon as he arrived home, sent a message to the Prior asking to see him.

Father Guzmán had not seen the rabbi for over two years—not since Salomé's conversion. He held the rabbi in high esteem and had not lost hope of winning him over to the true faith, as he held his to be. He was delighted to receive his message, but on reflection thought it better that the interview should take place in the Jewry where he often went to preach, than in the monastery where the rabbi had not been for the last two or three years. He announced his visit to the rabbi for the coming day.

9

That very morning, a man of about forty, red-faced, clean-shaven, tall, with a proud eye, more dreamy than executive, rode up the central avenue of Torremala towards the castle on a smart riding-mule, followed by two menial ones loaded with his luggage in charge of two servants. He was simply but elegantly dressed and had hung his long, grey, travelling cloak across the saddle. On his head he wore a square cap of woollen cloth which let his long silver-and-gold locks fall on his neck and shoulders and play in the morning wind. He rode on, full of self-assurance, almost of arrogance, and as one who knows that he will be well received, he alighted on the terraced yard in front of Don Rodrigo's door and called the servants in the portal with the time-hallowed words: "St. Mary the Most Pure!" "Without sin conceived!" answered a porter, who seeing the dignified mien of the visitor took off his cap. "Tell Don Rodrigo," the visitor said, "that I come to present my respects to him with a letter from my lord the Cardinal of Spain, his uncle." Don Rodrigo was at that very moment, in the backyard, dismounting from his morning ride. He could see the scene through the two gates and the central court. He limped across, leaning heavily on a stick, and received the visitor with the utmost courtesy. "My name, sir, is Don Cristóbal Colón." "Whatever your name, sir," answered Don Rodrigo, "you will honour this house as a friend of my lord the Cardinal of Spain." Don Rodrigo gave orders to have the servants and beasts well attended and took his guest into the house. "I assume you have come a long way and will wish to

have a rest. Here is your room. You have a good two hours before we dine. I shall come and fetch you here"; and he left his guest alone.

He went to his study and sat at his desk. It was a spacious room which two large windows could flood with light, but which now filtered the light of that sunny May morning through thick green lattice blinds. The tiled floor was covered with a cool esparto matting. The walls were whitewashed. All the chairs were black, straight-backed, austere and uncomfortable. Don Rodrigo sat at his desk and tore open the round seal bearing the arms of the Archbishop of Toledo: "My lord Don Rodrigo and dear nephew," he read, "I am sending this through Cristóbal Colón, a man of honour and science whom their Highnesses are sending out to sea to test his bold doctrines on the new rich lands which he says are to be found in the south-west, and on other errands of equal import. I know that you will treat him well. We all regretted that Your Mercy was not with us in the great victory which the Lord granted his Highness and all Christendom in Granada. May He bless Your Mercy's home. Your uncle: P. ✠"

Don Rodrigo had often heard about that curious adventurer who had come over from Portugal several years earlier and had been pestering dukes and bishops and Court officials with his dreams about the islands of Cipango and the lands of the Gran Khan. He was curious to know what kind of a person the dreamer was and had often discussed the matter with Father Guzmán and with the doctor, Fernán de Zamora, a converted Jew. He sent them both messages asking them to dine that very morning at twelve.

When he went to fetch his guest, he found him pacing the room, reading his Hours most devoutly. "Is Your Mercy ordained?" asked Don Rodrigo. "No, sir. But I have always been addicted to this devotion." "Let Your Mercy be content," humorously retorted Don Rodrigo, "to come and do penance with us," and he led him to the dining-room, a cool, long, dark hall, whitewashed on its upper part, wainscoted with dark wood and furnished with simple, solid, dark sideboards, a long black table and heavy straightbacked chairs. As soon as Colón entered the room, he was struck by Isabel Santamaría, Don Rodrigo's wife. Her beauty, the glorious, golden light of her hair which made a neat frame of plaited lines to the perfect oval of her face, her blue eyes, her stately poise, impressed him deeply. He belonged to a similar physical type, tall, stately, blue-eyed, with a white skin which easily became flushed and hair, though turning silver, originally gold. The doctor was a small, mercurial, dark-eyed, jovial sort of a man, who had some difficulty in repressing his wits and his natural gaiety. Father Guzmán, thin, pale, as one used to self-discipline, was nevertheless a man of the world and an asset to any

circle of friends, owing to his wide experience of life and to his learning. He blessed the meal and they all sat down to it.

"Your Mercy will forgive me," said Don Rodrigo to his guest, "if I endeavour to clear up a doubt which is in my mind. Your Mercy introduced himself to me as Don Cristóbal Colón. My lord the Cardinal writes plain Cristóbal Colón." The stranger's pale complexion reddened and his blue eyes flashed: "No mystery whatever. It is all plainly set down in my papers. Their Highnesses have ennobled me on the strength of a discovery I am to make. I am on my way to Palos. Three caravels, one hundred men, a couple of million maravedís and I pledge my honour to Your Mercies that the very glories of the fall of Granada will pale in comparison with the glory which I will put at the feet of the King and Queen."

The doctor chuckled, the hostess was impressed, Father Guzmán and Don Rodrigo glanced at the stranger with puzzled eyes. What kind of a man was this and how could the Cardinal of Spain give him letters of credence? Isabel Manrique, who felt the awkwardness of the situation, tried a diversion: "Were you present at the fall of Granada?" "I was," said Colón. "It was a magnificent sight. The red fortress was crowned with a motley crowd of infidels, and that squadron of King Ferdinand, followed by his knights, riding to meet the beaten Moor was like a Persian tapestry which suddenly begins to move. The sun shone gloriously over the snow-clad peaks, the sky was blue, thousands of Christians felt their hearts flooded with joy, and when the banner of Castille and the Cross of Our Lord" (he crossed himself) "rose over the Alhambra, the Queen fell on her knees and wept."

Isabel had forgotten the plate before her and was spellbound by the picture of the great victory of Christendom which the stranger had just painted. But the flight of Colón's imagination was by no means over. The top of the Alhambra, an exalted end for his listeners, was but a starting point for him. "On that day, in that solemn hour for Christendom" he proceeded with a grave voice—"I saw that banner and that Cross wafted across the ocean by a Christ-bearer and the light of the Lord's truth rise in triumph over lands still sunk in darkness beyond the seas. I feel certain that, sinner though I am, the Lord has chosen me for this great task, and that he will raise in me those—" He broke off.

There was a silence. "What lands are those Your Mercy is so sure of finding?" asked the doctor. "If one bears southwards one can see nothing but Guinea and its cape which the Portuguese have now turned all the way to Tartary and the realms of the Grand Khan: and if one bears dead west, what is there but the main sea till you come again to Tartary and the Grand Khan?"

"That may be so, that may be so," Colón admitted courteously. "Yet I venture to prophesy that, within this year of Our Lord I will find out the truth of it and that Your Mercies will hear of it, for the news will resound to the end of the world."

10

He turned suddenly to Isabel and in a buoyant voice asked, "Has my Lady a little family?" "A son, just a few weeks old," she answered. And she added, "And by the way I must leave Your Mercy, for he claims my presence." She stood up ready to go. They all rose to their feet and Colón said, "Madam, when he is a grown up man he will have a much bigger world in which to move. I will see to that." "But Your Mercy must not take him from me!" said Isabel, laughing. It was all like a fairy tale to her. "No, Madam. I may be gone by then. But as I know his father and mother, I surmise he will not be content to stay here when there will be so many new lands to see, conquer and convert to the faith of Our Lord."

The three men followed this dialogue with eyes lost in wonder. Was Colón a madman or a prophet? And how could a madman bring letters from the Cardinal of Spain? Isabel had vanished from the scene. The doctor, with an ironical, incredulous smile, led the attack again: "Your Mercy seems as sure of those lands as if they were already in your baggage." "I should have thought," said Don Rodrigo, "that Tartary and the lands of the Grand Khan must lie a very long way from here. I believe they lie towards the place where the sun rises in June. Now, Your Mercy, I gather, intends to reach those parts in the opposite direction?"

"I shall sail from Palos, and my first call—and my last in the known part of the world—will be in the Fortunate Islands," said Colón, meaning the Canary Islands. His tone was set.

"There must be a world of water to cross," objected Don Rodrigo.

"Never mind," retorted the visionary. "And moreover, how wide is that water? Go to Holy Writ. Read Esdras."

"Esdras is not Holy Writ," put in Father Guzmán.

"Father, that is a point to be discussed at leisure. Both St. Ambrose and St. Augustine read him as Your Paternity knows well. Esdras says that six parts of the earth are dry and only one is under water."

"He was no cosmographer, though," argued the doctor. Colón did not like this flippant remark. "Faith, sir, faith is what matters. Have you as much faith as a grain of mustard? Then you can move mountains and cross seas. And you may like to know," he went on

most unexpectedly, "that Esdras is held as a canonical authority by the reprobate Jews." Father Guzmán and Don Rodrigo's eyes met again. The fiery stranger seemed always to hanker back to the Jewish question by curiously devious ways. Father Guzmán suddenly changed the conversation. "Can Your Mercy tell us whether the King and Queen intend to take any measures to stem those anti-Jewish riots? We have just had one here which cost an old sinner his life." Colón's face passed from enthusiasm to concern. He glanced round the table somewhat surprised. "Your Mercies do not seem to have heard the news yet. . . . The Jews are to be expelled." The three men heard these words in silence and they remained in silence for a long while.

Wrapped in thought, Don Rodrigo felt the depth of the grief in store for his wife. The doctor was too shrewd not to realise that the position of the converted Jews would be but more precarious after the unconverted ones had left the country. As for Father Guzmán, a prominent member of the enlightened Order of St. Jerome, whose policy had always been favourable to mild and truly Gospel-like measures towards the Jews, he was pained to hear that the policy of Franciscans and Dominicans, the two anti-Jewish Orders, had at last carried the day. Colón gathered that he was in a house friendly to the Jews and was not in the least surprised, for such was the case with most aristocratic houses in those days. "The Lord has willed it so," he said. "It is not the first time that He smites Israel." "When is the measure due?" asked Don Rodrigo. "The Jews are given three months from the beginning of May. They must be gone by the beginning of August." He paused, his eyes lost in a dream, then added, "I will sail then too . . ."

II

Father Guzmán found the rabbi in his study. It was a comfortable room, cool and spacious, full of books, a few printed ones, but most of them manuscripts of Hebrew, Chaldaic, Greek and Latin religious texts. Father Guzmán knew them well. They had been the ammunition store for the friendly warfare which the priests of the two rival religions had waged against each other for years, and which had cost the rabbi his lovely daughter. "May the Lord be with you," said Father Guzmán, and he noted that the rabbi gave him as an answer, no words, but a long, eloquent, almost pathetic glance. They sat down.

The rabbi went straight to business. He told the friar about Isaac's death and the strange, unexpected message which the dying man had

given him for his daughter. "I thought it better to let you know and to give you the box, since, as you must have noticed, I have kept away from her for her own sake." And he put the Moorish box into his hands. The friar took it without attaching as much importance to it as he might have done in other circumstances, and asked, "Have you heard the news?" The rabbi smiled sadly. "Oh, I knew it was coming. You may think it odd. . . . I knew it was coming since I heard that Esquivel was buying up all the asses in the district!" The friar raised his eyebrows, wondering whether he was to take this phrase by its tragic or its comic end. "Yes. I know the scoundrel well. He is generally well informed and makes money out of every scrap of news. When I heard he was putting all his funds in asses I guessed at once. You see it takes no cunning to guess that if we are expelled, we shall have to sell our houses and lands and stock-in-trade for next to nothing; and as we shall not be allowed to take away horses or mules, we shall have to rely on donkeys. So, during the next few months, an ass will be worth a house and orchard any day! "Well!"—the friar was crossing himself—"I knew Esquivel to be a rascal, but not such a clever one!" He paused. "I suppose you will see your daughter before you go." The rabbi said nothing: two big tears rolled down his hollow cheeks and were lost in his beard. Father Guzmán was silent. He was praying mentally. Then, in a new tone of voice, he implored, "Rabbi, you know that it rests with you to be released from this martyrdom! You know that we do not expel those who give up Judaism and become Christians! Then? . . . You have been so often on the threshold of our church! . . . Dare! . . . Step forward. The arms of the Cross are wide open waiting for you. And you will be able to remain here, close to your daughter!"

The rabbi was pale. His lips quivered slightly and his eyes were half closed. He was undergoing a torture which, for all his fortitude, was apparent to the trained eye of the friar. "Father," he said at last in a hoarse voice (and the friar was thrilled to the marrow on hearing him for the first time say "Father" and not "Father Guzmán"). "Father, can you bind yourself towards me, if I speak out, as you would be bound to a penitent?" "You mean by secrecy?" "Yes." "I will, if that is your wish." "I cannot speak my mind unless you do," said the rabbi quietly but firmly. The friar looked at him for a while in silence: "Speak, then," he said gravely.

Ha-Levy looked right into the monk's eyes with his deep black eyes which seemed to sink back into ages of sorrow, and said. "I am a Christian!"

An ineffable emotion had flooded the friar's soul. "Oh brother!" he almost shouted, opening his arms. But the rabbi, still overcast with sadness, held him to his chair with a friendly but firm gesture. "I am

a Christian in all but the actual Sacraments. I have been studying the Gospels. Yes. Christ is indeed the Son of God. His words can only come from the Spirit. No man could have uttered them. I am His. But, Father, what would Jesus think of me, if through baptism, I evaded the atrocious fate of my flock and left them without their shepherd?" "But, brother, you, the shepherd, will show them the way of the true fold!" "Not under compulsion!" the rabbi shook his head. "Who would believe that my conversion was free and from the heart? I have thought of nothing else of late and I know I am right. It is hard, but the Lord has willed it so. When I was at the Gates, the Gates were closed. But I know that I follow Christ much more truly if I remain ostensibly outside His flock. He would have mercy and not sacrifice."

Father Guzmán was divided against himself. He was reluctant to accept what for him was a monstrous conclusion, yet a voice in him, the voice of human sincerity, forced him to acknowledge the strength of the rabbi's position, for whom the Christian thing to do was to remain a Jewish rabbi and to go down with his people. Rather incongruously and naïvely, the Prior said with a glance at the attractive room, "And yet, this would make a nice, comfortable parish house!" The rabbi smiled. He loved the house and garden where his father and grandfather had lived before him. He would not part with all those memories without a wrench which he dreaded—and then, there was his daughter and the ashes of his wife and his dead sons in the little Jewish cemetery which would remain for ever derelict. Father Guzmán read his thoughts. "Brother," he said, "I advise you to suspend your decision and to think it all over again. Since you have seen the light, let it shine freely. Remember what Our Lord Jesus Christ said about not hiding your light under a bushel. The Light will shine on us all." "It shines on me, by His mercy," answered the rabbi. "But it has shown me the way so that I cannot go astray. One last service I would ask of you: that you arrange for a meeting with my daughter in your cell before I go."

Father Guzmán looked again round the room, full of scholarly treasures, "What are you going to do with all these wonderful books?" he asked. "They are yours," answered the rabbi quietly.

From the day he had led the assault on Isaac and emptied the house of everything he could lay his hands on, Esquivel had been busy spreading the rumour that the house was haunted. His activities as a

speculator in asses were by no means a hindrance in this respect, for wherever he went to inspect an ass and make an offer, he did his best to bring in Isaac, his sudden death of sheer fear, "for no one had touched him at all," and the dead man's tendency to revisit his house as a discarnate phantasm, "he never had much flesh, anyhow!" His endeavours reached the ears of Zaccharias Jahuda, Isaac's rival in the usury trade, who lived at the other end of the Jewry, and who, though a younger man, had developed some of Isaac's looks, his thin, elongated figure, his crooked nose and his curved goatee, and his hollow chest. When Zaccharias heard that Esquivel went about everywhere asserting that Isaac's ghost haunted the house, he chuckled. "Clever lad!" he thought. "He wants to keep people off in case . . . well! We shall see!"

He had volunteered to help the rabbi with the funeral rites, which the rabbi, in his angelic simplicity, had thought natural as an act of trade solidarity, without suspecting that such unheard of generosity enabled Zaccharias to pocket one of the keys of Isaac's house. The front door had been walled up by order of the rabbi. The shrewd usurer did not fail to observe that a wax-model had been taken of the back-door lock, that of which he had secured a key; he wondered by whom, but when he heard the rumours about the ghost and made sure that they came from Esquivel, he wondered no more.

This discovery made it the more imperative to act quickly, for Isaac had left no will and had no family, and the ducats and jewels were bound to be somewhere. So that night he stole through the dark streets of the Jewry and paced for a while the neighbourhood of Isaac's house till he could insert, unobserved, a well-oiled key into the keyhole and penetrate into the house. He locked himself in carefully, lit a pocket lantern and began his search. He was most disappointed. Nothing anywhere. He went upstairs. Nothing. He opened a door in a wall. A few clothes, old, shabby. Yet, right at the end, one garment, somewhat better than the others. He pulled it out and inspected it more closely. It was a white silken burnous, brand new. He put it on and found it covered him down to his feet, which caused him not a little satisfaction.

Meanwhile Esquivel had run down the side lane of his house to the riverside and in the dark night had walked hurriedly towards Isaac's garden. He knew the house was empty, so why trouble about the house? But he knew also where the treasure had been buried. Didn't his knees remember still? He had his lantern with him, as well as a shovel and a pick-axe. But he knew the place so well that, having felt under-foot some of the familiar marks, he set to work without hesitation. He soon had the satisfaction of noticing that the earth was loose and freshly laid. Suspecting the coveted treasure to

be near at hand, he discarded the tools and worked on with his hands. Presently, he was able to place the lantern inside the hole deep enough to light it without giving himself away. His hands were busy removing soft earth. Suddenly, his heart began to thump in his chest: there was a corner of stiff white paper to be seen. He lifted it: there was a box beneath. His hands worked more feverishly than ever. There were letters—instructions no doubt. C. U. He brushed off more earth. R. S. E. . . he stopped, impressed. "Ah, the old dog!" He shrugged his shoulders. "Curse but disburse!" he said with a grin. He brushed off more earth: I SHALL RISE FROM DEATH—a light, it seemed to him, a faint light swept the ground in front of him. He glanced towards the house, gasped and fell on his knees. The ghost! Isaac, clad in white from head to foot, was looking at him! He trembled all over, unable to speak, to move, to pray, to exorcise the ghost, spellbound, till the ghost disappeared, then, still shaking, his teeth chattering, he seized the lantern and leaving his tools behind, fled home as quickly as his legs would carry him.

Zaccharias was ever so pleased. Not only had he put his enemy to flight, but he had gained access to most valuable information on the place where the treasure was hidden. He waited a reasonable time, and when it became plain to him that Esquivel had been frightened away for good, he came out into the garden and had little difficulty in finding the spot. Esquivel's tools were still there. He went on with the job and began by bringing the whole paper to light. CURSE . . . UPON HIM WHO TRIES TO OPEN THIS. I SHALL RISE FROM DEATH TO ACCURSE HIM AND HE SHALL DIE.

He read this curse without pleasure. He had just impersonated Isaac's ghost, but that did not mean that Isaac's ghost could not actually turn up as well; and he cast uneasy glances at the window from which he had frightened off poor Esquivel. "Well! Really!" he admonished himself. He set the paper aside and tried to master the secret of the coffer. To his amazement, there was no secret: the coffer was most willing to oblige and reveal its contents. He lifted the lid and found—the holy sack. Bitterly disappointed he put it back where he had found it, closed the lid pensively and made ready to go, after a fruitless night of endeavour. Yet some odd feeling made him stay on and put things back exactly as they were. He did not like that curse. What if Isaac did rise from death? And how sure he seemed to be that the man who would open the trunk would die! The least he, Zaccharias, could do, was to respect Isaac's wishes and leave the coffer well-covered with earth. This he set about doing, then he turned slowly homeward with an uneasy heart full of gloomy forebodings.

Three days later, a king's messenger arrived in Torremala, rode straight up to the castle, asked to see Don Rodrigo and delivered into his hands the Royal Letter announcing the expulsion of the Jews. Don Rodrigo had to take action. As the lord of the town, held under the sovereignty of the queen of Castille, he acted for the Crown in national matters, while in local matters he wielded an authority of his own. That very morning, with a flourish of trumpets and a rolling of drums and much showing of his banner and the queen's, his crier and herald (for he was both in one) proclaimed the Royal Letter in his domain. There was a great stir both amongst Christians and amongst Jews, and though the Royal Letter severely forbade all rioting or aggression against the persons and property of the Jews, there was a sudden rising of the popular wave which broke furiously over the Jewry, threatening to plunder and destroy it altogether.

Don Rodrigo called his men, all those who held lands granted for war services, and who therefore were required to keep arms and at least a horse in the king's service, and with as many as he could muster, he rode, despite his stiff leg, spear in hand, buckler on arm, to uphold the law. The Jewry was in turmoil. Jews of all ages, women and children were running here and there, screaming desperately, while bands of Christians chased them about, some in a blind fury, ready to murder them, but most in order to frighten them away while they plundered the rich jewel shops, silk and brocade stores and exchange counters. The once prosperous and orderly streets looked now as if a hurricane had swept through them. Goods, furniture and even human beings knocked down or frightened to the ground, littered streets and squares; children cried, women screamed, men swore and shouted. Esquivel came and went in the crowd as a self-appointed leader and general goader of the common passion. As a self-appointed aide-de-camp, Calero followed him like a shadow. He was the town's fool, a man of about twenty, but who looked forty; stalking along with jerky steps and ever-shaking body on a club foot, his knees bent sideways towards the left, his face long and vacant, a hanging jaw covered with an unkempt beard which was probably black under the dirt which made its colour undefined, a long nose, eyes in constant agitation and yet seeming to take in nothing of what went on around him (a most deceptive impression) and a mane of shaggy hair falling on the left side of his head while a wide bald patch seemed to have shifted from the usual place to leave the right side bare down to the ear. He went about in the turmoil with no passion, no fury, but a kind of earnest, business-like, dutiful activity, as if it were his birth-right as a fool to

take part in every folly that was going. "Let's kill all the Jews and steal all their goods," he went about repeating here and there with the utmost coolness.

Upon the arrival of Don Rodrigo, many of the plunderers disappeared with their ill-gotten wealth. Don Rodrigo in person, by an adroit stroke of his spear, knocked down a man who was running out of Zaccharias' house, hugging a heavy leather bag as if it were his dearest child. As he fell on his nose, a rivulet of gold coins began to flow from the bag. "Where did you steal that, you dirty dog?" asked Don Rodrigo in a fury. The man raised his unashamed face and Don Rodrigo recognised Esquivel. He sent some men to find out the position inside the usurer's house. When they came back to report that Zaccharias was lying across the door, lifeless, in a pool of blood, Don Rodrigo was listening to Calero who, with the utmost earnestness as if he were putting a business proposition to him, repeated: "Let's kill all the Jews and steal all their goods."

14

On his way home, Don Rodrigo was brooding over Esquivel's unconcerned attitude. After all, he had been caught stealing the gold of a man he had murdered, and Don Rodrigo was his natural judge. Why did he look so cool, indeed so impudent? The answer was only too clear: because he realised his own strength, the anti-Jewish passion of the people; and Don Rodrigo's weakness, the fact that he was married to a converted Jewess. Don Rodrigo had given orders to have him put in jail in the underground dungeon of his own manor and he was determined to see the case through in person as it was his right to do; but he was shrewd and he decided to grant himself a few days' reflection. He realised that, though strictly speaking Esquivel's crime deserved the death penalty, he would be goading the people into open rebellion were he to have the thief and murderer executed, given the temper of the people and his own wife's connections with the persecuted race. But while he let matters lie, the value of asses began to soar and all Torremala realised Esquivel's talent as a speculator. Every one, high and low, Jew and Christian, was laughing with one eye and weeping with the other over his bright idea, for asses were unattainable and there were Jews ready to give everything, even their homes and orchards, for a strong ass. The keynote was envy. Esquivel bade fair to become the richest man in Torremala and there was not a man who did not hate him for that and curse himself for not having thought of buying up asses in time. One Sunday, as Don Rodrigo was coming

back with his wife from high mass, walking at the slow pace of his stiff leg among the flock of his neighbours of all classes and professions. Calero happened to pass by. He stopped and with his usual liberty for talking to high and low as he pleased: "Ah, Don Rodrigo, you are an ass right enough, but it is a pity you were not good enough for Esquivel to buy you. He would have given a good sum for you had you been on the market." All heard it and laughed heartily with Don Rodrigo. But the fool's outburst set him thinking. From then on he began to drop dark hints about a death sentence on Esquivel. This brought Esquivel's wife to the manor, with his little daughter and son—a pathetic interview in which she threw herself at his feet, weeping and asking for mercy. Don Rodrigo spoke kindly to her and gave her reasons for hope, but put an end to the scene with a grave admonition: "See that your children get a better education than——" He looked at the boy and the girl and just added discreetly: "than he seems to have had himself."

He confiscated Esquivel's goods, all but his shop, so that he could go on keeping his family. But as for the asses, or rather the wealth they had brought to him, they went the way of all criminals' goods: one-fifth to the king, one-fifth to Don Rodrigo and three-fifths to the community of Torremala. When the sentence was known all Torremala thought well of it, blessed Don Rodrigo's mild justice (for they had all expected the gallows) and had a good laugh at Esquivel.

15

"Thanks to the friendly mediation of Father Guzmán, the rabbi was able to transact a number of delicate operations with his son-in-law. He sold his house to Don Rodrigo in exchange for credits abroad, the only kind of wealth the expelled Jews were allowed to export, and in order to secure these credits Don Rodrigo exported part of the clip of his magnificent merino stock. This transaction was very much to the taste of a wealthy brother of the rabbi who had been the tax-gatherer of several noblemen and, as such, had amassed a considerable fortune. He asked Don Rodrigo, through the rabbi, whether he would be willing to increase the export of wool and even to buy some for export in order to enable him to take abroad some of his own fortune in this roundabout way. Don Rodrigo agreed to the transaction. David ha-Levy the tax-gatherer, was very pleased and sent Don Rodrigo one thousand ducats of gold as a present, which Don Rodrigo promptly and proudly returned.

Several days later, the manor was already quietly settling down to

its night rest when there was a discreet but definite knock at the door. Old Suárez, slung over his shoulder a Moorish *tahali* or baldric, from which hung an excellent Toledo dagger, just in case . . . went to the main door and asked, "Who is there?" "Peaceful people," was the answer. The sound of the voice, rather than the actual words, seemed to Suárez a sufficient recommendation and he unbolted the small postern. There was a man outside, unknown to him. He evidently came from afar, for he was covered with dust, and so was his mule. "Here," he said, "put this in the hands of your master," and he gave Suárez two heavy cane sticks and a letter. "Who sends this?" "That," answered the stranger, "is neither your business nor mine. Farewell." And before Suárez had recovered from the rebuke, the messenger had leapt on his mule and disappeared into the night.

Don Rodrigo was intrigued by such a strange message delivered in such a strange manner. He looked at the sticks and looked again. They were made of some kind of cane, yet far heavier than any cane he knew; and they had golden tops engraved with the Manrique arms and the letters R.M. on one and A.M. on the other. As often happens, he allowed the enigma to tickle his fancy and his curiosity before solving it by merely reading what the letter had to say. After a while, he broke the seal and read: "My lord Don Rodrigo, gratitude will uphold its rights, and I have been endeavouring to satisfy the claims of mine towards Your Mercy in some way acceptable to you. These two sticks are contrived to be a solid prop for Your Mercy's old age and your son's. They are so built that the more heavily one leans on them the better they stand the weight. Do not try to send them back, for by the time they reach Your Mercy's hands, I shall be at sea. Keep them by. A time will come when you will be glad to lean on them, and then Your Mercy may devote a friendly thought to your Mercy's obedient servant: David ha-Levy."

Don Rodrigo glanced at the paper, then at the two cane sticks. He was puzzled, not very much pleased. But it was all so vague . . . He threw the two sticks on top of an old armory and the letter into a drawer full of old cast-off papers lying there to be forgotten. For deep down he had made up his mind to forget all about it.

Time was flowing past and the moment was drawing near when the Jews were to leave the country. For some of them it was but another move in their ever wandering life. For most of them, however,

it meant uprooting the family from the soil in which it had lived for many centuries, under Iberian, Roman, Visigothic, Muslim and Christian rule. Day after day the Jews of Torremala had a foretaste of their own fate, as heartrending caravans of Jews—the communities of other towns or villages—passed through their main street on their way to a distant harbour towards the unknown. Old and young, men, women and children, with but scanty belongings, for no export of any value was allowed, covered with dust and tears, and some blood, due now to accident now even to churlish attack, at times dejected and silent, at times putting a good face on their misery and covering the wails of the weak with the songs and religious chants of the strong, the Jews passed, a human river running towards the sea between human banks on which there were rocky stretches of cruel fanaticism, meadows of charity and even flowers of true brotherhood.

One morning at dawn Isabel Santamaria rode with her husband towards the monastery on the Moor's Hill. She was pale and her eyes were red with the many tears she had shed in silence during weeks of black despair. The Manriques were received by Father Guzmán, who quietly said to Isabel, "Your Mercy's father is upstairs." He then took her hand and led her up the wide stone steps towards his cell, while Don Rodrigo went into the chapel. When the friar opened the door, the rabbi was looking down the valley from the large bay window, lost in a dream as his eyes caressed the familiar landscape for the last time. He turned round and saw his daughter coming towards him. She put her arms round his neck and burst into tears. The friar had not entered with her. They were alone. Father and daughter saw each other for the first time since her conversion and for the last time on earth.

"Think of the joy!" she exclaimed, with a smile shining through her tears. "Think of the joy if you were to stay! Father! And just for a yes or a no! Just that you consent to . . . follow me. You were so near!" He looked at her. She saw that he was hesitating about something, wondering whether to speak or not. He made her sit down, took her hands in his and said, "Listen!" His voice, which she had not heard for so long, moved her to the depths. "Listen! Suppose I did . . . follow you. Who would have to be my teacher, my light? Jesus of course. I have been reading His word of late, more than usual. This is what He says: 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.' Do you remember? And He says also: 'But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep and fleeth.' So you see, my sweetheart, were I to follow you in the spirit, I would still have to leave you here and go with my flock." She listened in silence, weeping, helpless, hopeless. There was nothing to

be done. The will of God was holy and she could do nothing but bow before it. She had been chosen to suffer with her father and this, the very depth and bitterness of their agony; was henceforth to be the only link between them.

Don Rodrigo joined them. The rabbi mastered his emotion and thanked his son-in-law for his help. "There are a few messages—none very important—which Father Guzmán will explain. But there is one which I must deliver myself. You have agreed," said the rabbi to Don Rodrigo, "to have our cemetery respected and well cared for. I ask you as a favour to give a special attention to the tomb of my wife, your wife's mother, and of my children, who rest with her."

The exodus was to begin that very morning. The rabbi had made every arrangement with the elders of the community. The old and the infirm would be transported on carts drawn by younger men, to save the asses for the children and for the weaker women. At eight he was expected on the bridge where they were to meet. Their houses and goods had all been sold. Most of them had spent the morning in the cemetery for a last farewell to their ancestors. The rabbi explained all this to his son-in-law. He begged Don Rodrigo to support him in his wish to make this interview the last between him and his daughter, for her sake. He then went towards her, kissed and embraced her, and before she could realise what was in his mind, he left the room so hurriedly that he no longer heard her sobs when it dawned upon her that she would not see him again.

17

A horn tore the still air with its shrill sound and the exodus began. Don Rodrigo had given orders that a few armed horsemen should precede the desolate band of the cast-out, to protect them against the insults of fanatics and the injuries from the criminals, at any rate up to the boundary of his domain. The horsemen, after parleying with the rabbi, made the Christian crowd line up right and left of the avenue, leaving the middle of the road for the caravan of the Jews. The rabbi had demanded and obtained a severe, an almost military discipline from his younger men. He had told off many to draw the carts, which joggled along loaded with the infirm, the very old and the small children. These carts were the first to file past the curious crowd. Youths walked every few yards on each side of the convoy; after the carts, the older or weaker women passed riding donkeys, followed by the younger ones on foot. Finally the men took up the rearguard, the rabbi the last of them, leaning on a staff and accompanied by a

number of youths who carried the sacred books and the ornaments of the synagogue which he had been allowed to take out of the country. The crowd was silent and impressed by the tragic scene. The hot sun of southern Spain in August fell on exiled and exilers with impartial aloofness ; the earth was brown, the sky blue and the trees green but covered with a greyish dust. Every now and then there was a pathetic incident : a girl on the march broke down on seeing amongst the onlookers the hot, feverish eye of the Christian boy she was leaving behind ; a man or woman stopped as if suddenly robbed of all sense and wit, looking vacantly at some spot in the landscape, hallowed or endeared by events of yesterday, now dead for ever in an irrevocable past ; a churlish onlooker would shout some insult at the hated or despised Jew, or avenge some old feud with well-prepared verbal cruelty. In front of the pathetic procession Calero limped along with an earnest face, as if he were responsible for the whole event. Every now and then he explained to the onlookers in a kind of confidential aside : " The Jews are going, but we keep their goods." And he winked knowingly as if the whole thing were a capital joke.

The small community, limp, torn from its roots, about a thousand in all, plodded along down the main avenue and slowly climbed the hill, the crest of which limited Don Rodrigo's domain. When they reached it, they all stopped, ostensibly for a well-earned rest, for they were exhausted with their march in the hot sun ; really in order to feast again and for the last time on the sight of the land which had been their home. The infirm in their carts, the women, the old and the young, the children, all turned towards Torremala, the river, mirroring the skies behind a screen of lofty poplars, the castle, on the hill, sitting placidly amidst the olive trees and flower beds, the monastery beyond, a grey pile decorated with lines of cypress trees, the reddish land, combed into patterns by the patient ploughs, and the Jewry once rich and prosperous, now a heap of ruins and of memories—the sight was too much for them : they were heart-broken and with arms raised to heaven they implored the God of Israel to come and protect them in their affliction.

The sun, the only visible feature of God, went quietly on its course, flooding both them and the home they left with its impassive light.

PART III

XUCHITL GROWS UP BETWEEN THE HOST OF DARKNESS
AND THE HOST OF LIGHT

I

AFTER the death of Queen Fruity Nipple, Nezawal Pilli withdrew into a deeper and deeper solitude, seeking no company but that of the heavenly stars. It was noticed in the palace that he abstained from all commerce with his concubines. In later years he was often seen bleeding with wounds which appeared to be self-inflicted in sacrifice. This increased his reputation as an astrologer and a man devoted to the gods—which would have made him smile.

His little daughter Xuchitl came to bring some freedom and fancy to this lonely soul. She was irresponsible as a child and unexpected as a woman. Nezawal Pilli enjoyed in his favourite child a holiday from his rigid reason, without shame or remorse. He watched her grow with deep delight, brooding now and then over the melancholy thought that her nurses would soon fill her innocent head with the strangest and wildest notions.

He was overjoyed when the child began to show signs of a keen intelligence and he used to spend some time with her every day. He answered her questions to the best of his ability, as he would have done those of a grown-up person, and often confessed his ignorance rather than give her a fanciful, traditional or superstitious explanation of facts which puzzled her and still puzzled him. The visit to her father's apartments was the happiest moment of the day for little Xuchitl.

2

From her tenderest years Xuchitl had spent hours watching the animals of all kinds which her father kept in a kind of private zoo, a rival of the rich animal collection for which Moteczuma, the Mexican emperor, was famous. By the jasper edge of the ponds of both salt and fresh water, marvellously clean and well kept, in which water fowl sported themselves; in the long halls in which, behind neatly contrived wooden cages, all kinds of wild animals, from the *ocelotl* or

Mexican tiger to the wild cat, paced to and fro, devouring their rage in confinement and solitude ; and even in the apartments in which hunchbacks and other human oddities were housed and all but caged with more natural curiosity than human charity, little Xuchitl learned lessons of living biology which no one in particular had taken the trouble to teach her. In that life of close familiarity with animals, she acquired a complete and concrete command of the facts of reproduction which she expressed, if necessary, with that freedom from sexual and other taboos which was and still is characteristic of the Mexican people.

3

The chief of her nurses was Citlali. After the Queen's death, Long Face's wife had been transferred by Three-Reeds to the service of the little princess where she had gradually risen to the chief position owing to the affection which she had kindled in Xuchitl's heart. Citlali was soft, tender and quiet, and little Xuchitl enjoyed both the smooth rhythm of her movements and the tranquil atmosphere which emanated from her soul.

Sitting on her heels, with her knees on the mat, her neat, small hands folded on her lap, facing Citlali, Xuchitl listened with eyes wide with curiosity to the stories of life and creation which the maid recited out of a common store of popular lore carefully nursed by the priests. Xuchitl's curiosity was eagerly caught by everything, from high cosmogony to the trivial play of wit and guesswork in which the Aztec simple people delighted. "Do you see that blue sky?" Citlali asked, pointing to the open window. "There are ten more above it," and she opened both hands to make the little girl realise that multitude of heavens as numerous as the fingers on both her hands. "Now, on top of them all, there is a city much bigger than ours, made of gold and the meadows are made of jade. . . ."

"And what is the corn made of?" asked little Xuchitl with a twig of her father's rationalism.

"Corn? That, I don't know. . . . They don't have any corn up there. They don't need it. They spend their days and nights in joys and delights."

"Who?" asked Xuchitl. That is a question which Citlali had never considered. But divine inspiration came to the rescue: "The gods," she answered, "or rather the father and mother of the gods."

"Have they a father and a mother?" asked Xuchitl most circumstantially.

"Of course. He is Two-Lords and she is Two-Ladies." "Are they two each?" asked Xuchitl with her eyes as well as with her mouth.

"No. That is just their name. Ometecuhtli, you see, *ome*" (and she showed two fingers) "and *tecuhtli*" (and she raised her stature and swelled her chest, to suggest lordship) "that is he; and Omecihuatl, that is *ome*" (again she raised two fingers) "and *cihuatl*" (and she cast her humble self into what she imagined to be a queenly attitude) "they are the chief god and the chief goddess. They have also other names. He is called Shining Star——"

"Star! . . . Like you! . . ." exclaimed the child with a touch of reverence towards her nurse.

"Citlalatónac. I am only Citlali. I don't shine. And his wife Star-Skirt."

"I know why!" exclaimed Xuchitl, excited at her own imagination. "Because the light that shines round a star is like the *cueitl* made of cotton which women wear round their waist."

"Perhaps," said Citlali, who had not thought it out. "At any rate, Citlalatónac and Citlalicue are the Lord and the Lady of the heavenly city, and they live up there and enjoy each other and have many children we know nothing about. But once, ah, once, something happened. . . ."

She kept silence for a while. She was not trying to whet the child's appetite, which was in no need of such stimulus. A child herself, she had paused because she was caught by the mighty mystery she was about to impart.

"Once," she proceeded with a different, a more confidential voice, "Star-Skirt gave birth to a big flint-knife——" "A flint-knife!" the child cried out horrified. "But it must have cut her womb to pieces." "Yes," confirmed the maid, "a flint-knife. It did not hurt her, for she opened her legs wide. And her other sons were furious and decided to throw the knife over from their heavenly city down to the earth, and it fell on a spot called Seven-Caves and gave rise to one thousand six hundred gods and goddesses."

"But, Citlali! There is no room for so many gods!"

Citlali laughed heartily. "They need no room. They are like air, which comes and goes and needs no rest and has no seat."

"Then," asked Xuchitl, "why did you tell me the other day that the stone seat in that street corner . . . you know, the *momoztli*, that seat covered with green branches——" "Yes. I know, my little precious feather. I told you those *momoztli* are seats which are built at many road crossings in case Tetzcatlipuca passes by. For he is the chief of the gods and his other name is the Almighty. And it is a fact that when he wants to, he comes down on earth always in the

figure of a man. And being in the figure of a man, he gets tired and likes to sit on his behind."

"But," argued Xuchitl, "if he is Almighty, he only gets tired if he wants to get tired." This worried Citlali for a while. She drummed idly on the *wewel* or tamburin which lay on the mat close to her. "I know," she suddenly said, as if under a new inspiration. "You see, once he has wanted something, he must go through with it, so when he has wanted to be a man for a time; he must want to be tired. He cannot help that, can he?"

Xuchitl was not up to so much theology at so early an age and Citlali breathed with relief. "After him," she proceeded, anxious to change the subject, "the most powerful lord is Witchilopochtli, who was born of woman without any man having anything to do with her."

"That cannot be, Citlali. You told me yourself that you could have no children since your husband went to the place without doors and windows."

"That is so for us. But not for Witchilopochtli, because he is a powerful lord."

"Is he also almighty? I mean, can he do all he likes?"

"Of course," answered Citlali with complete assurance; and Xuchitl, quick to seize her advantage: "But suppose Witchilopochtli likes one thing and Tetzcatlipuca wants it also, I mean, wants it for himself and not for Witchilopochtli . . . who wins?"

"God does not eat god," said Citlali calmly. "They always manage to get on with each other."

"Tell me then . . . How was he made? Who was his father, if he had no father?"

"You must know that once upon a time there was a woman called Snake-Skirt, who had many children, so many that they were known as the four hundred. And as she was very pious, she did penance by sweeping clean the hill of Coatepec. One day, as she was sweeping, a small ball of down fell softly at her feet from nowhere. She picked it up and hid it, close to her skin, under her waistband. When she finished her work, she looked for the ball but could not find it, and then she felt that she was pregnant."

Xuchitl stared at Citlali with eyes widened by surprise and astonishment. "But Citlali! . . . How could that be! I know, I know it is not like that. I have seen a man-monkey and a woman-monkey in the monkey house——"

"Gods are not monkeys, are they? Snake-Skirt's four hundred sons were furious . . ."

"Why?" asked Xuchitl.

"Because they thought their mother had misbehaved with a man."

"Ah," said the little girl, and she tucked away that idea in her mind in order to think it over, for she was not sure that she understood it. "A daughter of Snake-Skirt," Citlali proceeded, "was their leader, and they made up their minds to kill Snake-Skirt. But one of her brothers did not agree and came to warn her. "Uncle," said Witchilopochtli from inside his mother's body, "don't worry, for I know my business." And he asked, "Where are they now?" "They are already in Tzompantitlan." And after a while, he asked again, "And now?" "They are already in Apetlac." "And now?" "They are already in the mountain pass." "They are already here, and Coyolxauhqui is at their head."

Xuchitl followed the story with a passionate interest. "Then?" "Then," said Citlali clapping her hands, "Witchilopochtli came out all of a sudden—" "From between Snake-Skirt's legs?"

"Of course. He rushed out. His left arm was covered with humming-bird feathers—" "But Citlali! How could he? Just born . . ."

"Of course he did. The proof is his name. You see *Uitzitzin* . . ." and she fluttered her fingers to suggest a humming bird—"and *lopochtli*"—and she lifted her left arm. "And moreover he had a shield and a dart and a head-dress of feathers; his face and legs and arms were painted blue, and his left leg was covered with feathers."

This cataract of wonders submerged Xuchitl's rationalism; and Citlali, carried away by her own eloquence, continued, "Witchilopochtli gave orders to one Tochencalqui, who happened to be handy, to kindle a snake made of pine torches, and this *xiuhcoatl* or fire-snake attacked Coyolxauhqui, who died, and then Witchilopochtli in person rushed to the four hundred and destroyed them and threw them out of the hill of Coatepec."

"The king wants to see his daughter," said a soft-footed slave at the door.

4

Xuchitl was delighted, for she loved her father and enjoyed his company and conversation more than any other pleasure in her life. But she was well bred and she waited till Citlali was ready to accompany her to her father's quarters. They walked hand in hand, through hall after hall, and as they passed a heavily decorated curtain, Xuchitl asked, "What is behind that curtain?" "Two more curtains . . ."

answered Citlali somewhat uncomfortably. "And what is behind the three curtains?" "A door. . . . You need not worry. It is always locked."

"Why should I worry," asked Xuchitl, and Citlali realised that, anxious to say too little, she had said too much. She had not the strength to refrain from a further confidence and whispered, "They are the haunted apartments!" "Whose apartments?" asked Xuchitl without realising the full import of the word *haunted*. "Those of the Wanton Queen. It is a dreadful story. I cannot tell it to you till you are older." "When can you tell me? When I am twelve? . . . Thirteen? . . . Fourteen? . . ."

"Perhaps when you are thirteen," answered Citlali, but she herself was nearly twice that age and shuddered at the thought of that story she would not tell.

A servant of the King's household, wearing a white loin cloth, told them the King was in the shooting gallery, which delighted Xuchitl. The King was alone as usual. He had unclasped his cotton mantle and showed his manly body, brilliantly lit by a slanting flood of sunlight which poured in under the gallery roof. He was standing, holding a blowgun in his left hand, while his right hand rested on a sheaf of papers which were laid on the wide wooden balustrade. He received his little daughter with a loving smile, yet with the stiff attitude which traditionally separated children and grown-ups.

"How is my precious feather?" he asked. "Ready to obey," she answered formally. He made her sit by his side in the open and dismissed Citlali. The park spread its leafy spaces before them, and below, the pools made a pattern of minute skies amidst a labyrinth of sandy paths, flower-bushes and trees. These pools were stone basins cut into the rock over which the garden had grown, and artfully contrived to attract water fowl from the lagoon for the King's pleasure.

"Xuchitl," said the King, "ask freely whatever is in your mind." This released the curiosity repressed in the child. "Why are all the birds in the square pool white and all those in the round pool black?" she asked. The King was pleased. He recognised his own inquiring mind in this question. "The black birds," he explained, "prefer the round pool because it is shadier and the sun is too hot for them. Moreover, I want to keep them apart, and so I keep a special kind of fish in the square pool which those white ducks are fond of eating."

"And why do you want to keep them apart?" asked the child. "See," he answered. He loaded his blowgun and shot at the white birds. There was a crowd of them sporting themselves in the water. One fell, hit; the others took no notice and went on playing about.

"Oh, what a good shot!" Xuchitl cried out. But the King added: "Now see," He shot again at a troop of black lagoon-hens which were rocking themselves on the wavy waters of the round pool: all fled like lightning. "You see? The white ones remain unruffled by danger; the black ones fly away. I have painted it all here," and he showed his daughter the papers in which he set down his observations on the water fowl. "If you watch animals live, you learn much about them, and even about yourself."

He took her by the hand and led her indoors. He sat on his ycpalli and made her sit, or rather squat, on the floor in front of him. "Now," he said, "tell me something you have learnt of late." "I have been learning riddles," she said, very much pleased with herself. "Let me hear some." The child asked him: "What is a blue bowl sown over with roast corn grains?" The King feigned to seek a solution of this time-honoured nursery conundrum, and suddenly "guessed": "The sky sown over with stars!" "You guessed! Now, another one. What is that which goes through a valley and lets its bowels drag behind it?" The King recognised the peculiar taste of his people. "I don't know. What is it?" "The needle, with its thread dragging behind it." "But the valley?" asked the King. "Ah, you don't see it! The valley is the skirt you are sowing with it, which makes valleys. Now guess this. What is it that you catch on a black hill and you kill on a white mat?"

"That, I am sure I cannot guess."

"Can't you?" asked the child with a feeling of superiority. "The louse. Because you catch it on your head and kill it on your nail!"

"Have you ever seen a louse?" asked the King.

"What is a louse?" asked Xuchitl, gazing at her father with wide eyes. The King took her two hands in his and made her rise close to him. "Now, listen to me. You must never, you hear? you must never use a word you do not understand before asking me first what it means?" He was vexed not only at the kind of lore his daughter was acquiring, but at her lapse from her usual acuteness and at the ease with which she had memorised a set of words without meaning.

"Who taught you that puzzle? Was it Citlali?" "No. It was the kitchen maid." "Forget it. What has Citlali been teaching you?"

"The birth of Witchilopochtli. But I don't believe it." "Why?" asked Nezawal Pilli, somewhat surprised. "Because he could not be born of a ball of down, nor come out complete with buckler and arrows on the day of his birth from between his mother's legs."

"Can you think of a canoe?"

"Yes . . . I can . . ." She hesitated, wondering what he meant.

"Very well. Think of one. Think of the canoe you would like to have, exactly as you would love to have it. Are you thinking of it now? What is it like?"

She looked into a dream in space: "It is long like . . . like a tall man lying down . . . and narrow at the bow and wide behind, and it is all white, carved with ducks, some black and some green, and it has three benches across it and a lovely red matting at the bottom and a blue awning over it and oh how it runs . . . !"

"And how about the oarsman?"

"He is tall and strong and has big arms and a wide mouth and a flat nose and he is ugly but nice and speaks with a husky voice."

"Now you see, that oarsman has come out of your mouth in your lovely canoe, and he had no father, not even a ball of down."

He sent her away saying, "Think of that puzzle, my little precious jade. And tell that kitchen-maid you do not want any of hers."

5

One day a slave called on King Nezawal Pilli with a message from Xuchitl asking to be received. It was the first time that such a thing happened. The King was uneasy, wondering what could have upset his daughter to the point of requiring a visit to her father without delay. He sent for her at once.

She was eleven. She was not very tall, but she was so slender and her poise in standing and walking was so graceful, that she looked tall. Her eyes were long, almond-shaped; her hair dark auburn and her complexion almost white; her nose and forehead were clear-cut like her father's, and she had inherited her mother's sweet smile.

She was upset. Her observant father saw it at once through her well-bred self-control. "Speak and ask questions as you please," he granted at once.

"Father," she said, "Citlali has been telling me such dreadful things that I wanted to know the truth from you. She tells me the world may end this year—" and the child, unable to hold herself any longer burst into tears.

The King made her sit on his knee and did not speak till she stopped crying. Then he said, "You must never allow yourself to be upset by anything you hear through your ears. No bad news but that which come from your own heart should ever upset you."

She looked into his deep, black eyes, not daring to ask the question that tortured her mind, but he saw the question in her eyes and answered it. "No, the world is not going to end. Every fifty-two years we begin our count of the years over again, giving them the same names, because we only have fifty-two names and there is no end to the years."

"Truly, no end?"

"No end. This year is a 2-Reeds; the end of a sheaf of years, as we call the whole fifty-two; we must tie up the sheaf. The priests make it more solemn by having all fires put out and kindling a new fire there on the hill. They spread doubts about whether the world is going to continue because they want us all to realise that we owe all life to the gods, who could stop the world if they wanted."

Xuchitl leapt down from her father's knee. "I must run to tell Citlali."

"No. You must not. You must never tell Citlali or any one else anything I tell you about the gods. Remember, my little feather: nothing about the gods."

6

Ixcawatzin meanwhile grew to manhood within the walls of the austere Calmecac. At four in the morning he was awakened by the roll of the wooden drum and, with his comrades, swept and cleaned the students' living quarters, the courtyards and the temple. The boys then breakfasted on a couple of *tortillas* of maize, and after breakfast were sent afield in search of maguey-thorns, which were in great demand for sacrificial purposes, or to fetch wood to burn in the home fire. Upon their return, the boys disciplined themselves with maguey-thorns and bathed; then they listened to their teachers who instructed them in the secrets of astrology, and in the rites and ceremonies of the worship of their several gods, and taught them to decipher the elaborate pictograms which recorded the facts and fancies of their past history.

They took their repast in common. It was frugal and healthy; no intoxicating beverage was permitted. In the afternoon they attended musical and dancing lessons in the Cuicacalli. At dusk boys and priests began to prepare for their night prayers and sacrifices, and at nightfall they all set out carrying a bag containing their *copalli* or incense, pine-torches and a number of maguey-thorns stuck into a hayball. Each carried also an earthenware incense-burner and a

conch to play on the way, leaving a melodious track of his wanderings.

The priests and the more spirited boys walked fast and far into the forest to a favourite spot wherein to be isolated and do penance ; the smaller boys would walk two or three miles. There, in the awful solitude of nature, under the cloak of night, far from each other, each inflicted on his flesh the punishment which it deserved and for a long while became a living pin cushion for maguey-thorns. In this state of physical suffering, they meditated on their gods, and then, after picking out the thorns from their limbs and offering their blood to the Lord and the Lady of Night, each priest and student walked home by the light of his pine torch, playing on his melancholy conch the forlorn tune of human searchings and wanderings in the perennial darkness.

All went to sleep as soon as they arrived back, but at midnight a conch called them from their slumbers to prayer and penance, and those who slept on were soon made to wake up by scores of thorns stuck right into their earlobes, arms, legs and chest as a punishment. While the boys prayed, the priests performed a ritual collective bathe in the pond of the monastery yard. Then, sleep again till the drum called every one back to work and penance at four in the morning.

7

Ixcawatzin was from the first foremost in duty, piety and devotion. The earliest up, the farthest out, the humblest at work, the most courteous in greeting priest or comrade, he never had to face the nettle-whip or the magisterial thorn.

There was something wistful and forlorn about his manner which made him more attractive and more difficult of approach than the rest of his comrades, so that he was both the most popular and the most lonely soul in the Calmecac. When he ventured out into the forest for sacrifice and meditation, though young still, he vied with the oldest and most revered priests in his search for the solitary, the inaccessible and the distant spot. There he inflicted upon himself as heavy a punishment as the most ascetic of his masters ; but when he drew the sacrificial thorns out of his limbs and, collecting the trickles of blood with his fingers, sprinkled them to the four corners of the earth, some days in a faint whisper, some days in a singing clear voice, he would say :

“Xuchitl ! Xuchitl ! Xuchitl !”

8

He was soon selected Elder-Brother, monitor of youngsters, a post in which he achieved a great reputation both with the priests and with the boys themselves, for his hard but just and honourable leadership. He was meanwhile perfecting his own education as a soldier-priest and had shown his endurance by carrying all the bucklers of his group on his back from the training field to the Calmecac. He was tested in manoeuvres and found valiant and resourceful, so without waiting for a regular war, he was promoted Chief of Youths. He was splendid in body if somewhat narrow and sombre in soul.

One night, as he was coming home from the forest, his arms and legs still bleeding, playing on his conch with such consummate ability and haunting sadness that all those who heard him stayed to listen in the dark, he stumbled on somebody who seemed to be asleep on the ground. He stopped and drew his pine torch close to the sleeper. To his horror and disgust he recognised one of the elder boys in his group, who lay helplessly drunk across his path. He signalled for help with his conch. Three boys ran to the spot from the dark streets, and the passive limp body was conveyed to the monastery. The priests had to sit in judgment on the case. Ixcawatzin was free from responsibility, for the boy, who was not training for priesthood, but only for soldiering, had been allowed in accordance with custom to sleep out with his mistress; but drunkenness meant death for the drunkard, whether by strangulation, by a volley of arrows or by being roasted alive. It was decided to have the culprit strangled, and the duty of executing him naturally fell on Ixcawatzin.

He dreaded it at first, fearing to remain below the standard of courage and callousness required. Brooding over it, he went to the chapel and squatted worshipfully before the image of Quetzalcoatl. He made strenuous efforts to identify himself with the god, feeling that if he became that god he would be equal to the grim task. While he was thus absorbed in contemplation of the god, the High Priest walked silently behind him and laid his hand on the youth's shoulder: "Come. The god has heard your prayer." He took Ixcawatzin to one of the ritual service rooms and with the help of other priests he painted the youth black from head to foot and dressed him with Quetzalcoatl's attributes, till Ixcawatzin himself, seeing his own image in a large polished stone mirror, was seized with holy terror. He was bid to keep silent and to sink into his new godly being till the moment came.

It was not long. A lugubrious droning on the wooden drums called the two congregations, of priests and of boys, to the big square cloister.

The victim was brought naked with a necklace of holy paper round his neck and a paper tiara on his head, and as he stood, pale and trembling, supported by two comrades, Ixcawatzin-Quetzalcoatl suddenly rushed out from behind the Holy Curtain beside the high altar, fell on him and laid him lifeless on the floor, while a thrill of religious horror ran through the two crowds at the sight of the living god in his deadly anger.

9

Citlali decided to teach Xuchitl to weave, for she was old enough for that, considering her station. They were both on their knees, sitting on their heels, and Xuchitl was working hard at the primitive loom, tied to a straight pole at one end and held to the ground at the other by the pressure of her own knees.

"Citlali," she asked, "Who invented weaving?"

"Quetzalcoatl," answered Citlali in a confident, believing voice.

"Why was he called Quetzacoatl?"

"Because he was as wise as a serpent and as precious as a *quetzalli*-feather."

"What was he like?"

"Now, watch your thread! You see, there is a knot there. You must see that it remains on the other side. . . . He was white-skinned and he had a long black beard. He was so clever that he knew everything."

"For instance?"

"He taught the Toltecs—for he lived in Tulla—all the arts: how to smelt and work silver and gold, and how to weave and how to make houses. And in his time the houses were made of *chalchivittls* and turquoises and precious green feathers; and maize was so tall that people climbed up the stalks as we do trees; and cotton grew already coloured red or yellow or blue or green; and maize was so plentiful that the small cobs were not eaten but just burnt for heating baths."

Xuchitl had been struck motionless and idle. She did not speak. She just waited for more.

"Then a bad magician known as Tlitacaoan made up his mind to destroy the Feathered Serpent." "But why?" asked Xuchitl, annoyed. "I don't know. I suppose he was envious. He turned himself into an old man and came to see Quetzalcoatl; but Quetzalcoatl's pages did not let him pass. So he insisted and the pages told Quetzalcoatl, who answered: 'Let him enter, for I have been expecting him many a day.'"

"Did Quetzalcoatl know who he was?"

"No. He didn't."

"But then, how could he say that he had been expecting him."

Citlali was puzzled. She scratched her head. "I don't know that. But that is what Quetzalcoatl said. That is certain. At any rate, the old man came in and asked Quetzalcoatl how he felt. 'Not very well,' answered Quetzalcoatl. 'All my body aches and I can move neither hand nor foot.' Then the nasty old man gave Quetzalcoatl some medicine and he took it and felt much better and took more and got drunk and he began to weep, for the old man had given him *teometl* to drink.

"But didn't you say that Quetzalcoatl knew everything?"

"Yes. He did, of course."

"But then, how is it he did not know that the old man was giving him *teometl*?"

"Because *teometl* had not been invented yet and the old man had just made it for the first time from the honey of maguey-trunks. And then he left him drunk and suddenly he came back to Tula——"

"Who?"

"The old man, I mean the bad magician Titlacaoan. This time he came back disguised as a peasant selling green axi, and he sat facing the windows of the Palace. The king——"

"Was that Quetzalcoatl?"

"No. Quetzalcoatl was the High Priest and had no wife and no children. But the King Huemac had a lovely daughter, so lovely that he had refused her to all the Toltecs who had sought to marry her. She happened to be at the window and saw the peasant naked, after the fashion of the Toveyans which he had adopted. As soon as she saw him naked, showing all, without a loincloth, she felt a tickle between her legs for him——"

"Why?"

Citlali smiled.

"You shall soon know, my little *chalchiwitl*. When a woman feels a tickle between her legs for a man, that means that she wants to lie with him. So she fell sick of desire. Huemac asked the women of his daughter's household what was the cause of her sickness. "Sir," they said, "your daughter saw a Toveyan who came selling green axi, and as soon as she saw him naked without his *maxtle*, she fell sick of desire." The king ordered him fetched but he could not be found. Suddenly, there he was again, selling green axi in the market. He was brought before Huemac. "Why do you go about without a *maxtle*?" asked the king. "This is the custom in our country," he answered. "You

have made my daughter sick and you must cure her." So they cut his hair and washed him and painted him all over with ink——"

"Why?"

"That was the Toltec way," she answered with the quiet acceptance of other people's oddities which wise people acquire in life and simple people possess at birth. "And they led him to the fair maid's bed."

"But how is it that Quetzalcoatl could not help his friend the king?"

"Because Titlacaoan was stronger than Quetzalcoatl. And so he beat him. And Quetzalcoatl left the country. He walked so much that he was tired and he sat down on a stone in Temalpolco and wept. The tears made holes in the stone and to this day there is a trace of his buttocks as if he had sat on a cake of maize before it is baked."

Xuchitl began to weave again, slowly, with her eyes on the loom and her mind in the story.

"Did you feel a tickle between your legs when you met Long Face for the first time?"

"Of course I did."

"Would I, if I met a man I would like to marry?"

"You are too young yet, my little precious feather."

"When would I? When I am twelve. . . ."

"Perhaps."

"Then you will tell me the story of the Wanton Queen who used to live behind the three curtains."

"Perhaps."

.10

Xuchitl walked from puzzlement to puzzlement. All that month, an unusual activity had hustled the sedate pace of the royal household. Everybody was busy—the women sewing garments, the men weaving mats, making pottery, carving stone-mills for the kitchen, and even, the more skilful of them, small images of the gods. And suddenly, as the first of the five "empty days" set in, those five days, belonging to no month or week, with which all years ended, there was a general hush and a lull and everybody went about with idle hands, aimlessly and even dispirited.

"Why is that?" she asked Citlali.

"I have already told you, but you don't seem to take it in," answered Citlali. "This is the end of the Sheaf. We don't know whether there is going to be a new Sheaf or not. We shan't know till five days from now. So first we must throw everything we have into

the lagoon, for it would be no use to us if the world were to end, would it?"

"But suppose it goes on?"

"That is why we have made new garments and stone-mills and pots and pans."

Xuchitl saw the inconsistency but was impressed by the firmness with which it was held.

"And what happens then?"

Citlali was cutting eyes and a mouth into a hollow dried maguey-palm. "What is that you are doing?"

"I am preparing your mask." She spoke without assurance, feeling through the child, the tacit opposition of Nezawal Pilli to all the traditional beliefs which made the coming day so solemn and sacred. "You must wear it the whole night and never for once go to sleep, for if you are caught by the *tzitzimiles* who always get loose that night you will be devoured by them in a whiff."

"What are *tzitzimiles*?"

"What a question!" Citlali was astounded. Why, this child was eleven and she asked what were the *tzitzimiles*! What a godless education, she thought. She turned her mind to answering it while Xuchitl's glance rested on her, inquisitive and ever so slightly ironical. "Well, you see . . ." The fact was that she did not know herself what they were. She had known about them all her life and knew they would be terrible if she ever met them, but she had never met either them or any one who had.

"They are . . . things," she said, "which eat children on the end-of-sheaf day, and pregnant women, if they are not masked and locked up, 'also turn into *tzitzimiles* and eat everything.'"

"And what else happens?" Xuchitl asked, not the least impressed.

"All fires are put out everywhere. Nothing burns anywhere . . ."

"Not even an *acayetl*?" asked Xuchitl.

"No. Smokers also, must put out their tobacco tubes. Nothing of the old fire must remain, and till the stars of heaven have passed over the top line showing that the world goes on, the new fire cannot be made."

"And where is it made?"

"On the hill of Uixachtecatepetl, over the water in Iztapalapa."

Xuchitl knew enough to follow the preparations made for the ceremony. In the humble houses every home utensil was thrown into the lake; in her father's house only a number of objects used in the kitchens, but nothing of value, for Nezawal Pilli saw in the whole

thing a noble symbol covered with a good deal of sheer superstition, so he concentrated on the former, in order to escape the latter. He had a huge pile of wood, heavily loaded with copal incense, built in the chief courtyard of his palace, for the new fire to be kindled in it, and when the day came he took care to summon Xuchitl to his side.

II

Xuchitl had seen the servants' dwellings emptied of their furniture, utensils and linen, which had been dumped into the lagoon, and all the fires were out. On her way to her father's apartments, she saw Three-Reeds shepherding a weird procession of pregnant women, all wearing maguey-palm masks. He was leading them to an underground hall where they would remain locked up till the New Fire was kindled so that they should not become Tzitzimitles. Xuchitl was far more impressed by the sight of these masked women than by all the tales she had heard of the Tzitzimitles, and she drew close to Citlali as if the masked women were the dreaded spirits themselves. Citlali, who walked by her side, deeply immersed in her dark forebodings, was carrying the mask which she had made for Xuchitl and which she expected the child to don immediately after sunset. She pointed at it by way of explanation; and both went on in silence, and felt relieved when the procession of women had passed out of sight.

Before reaching the King's apartments they met the three boy-princes, the three legitimate sons of Nezawal Pilli, one, Cacama, a half-brother, and the other two, Flower-of-Vanilla-Face and Cohuanacoch, brothers of Xuchitl. They were fine youngsters, whose lithe, lean bodies, untrammelled by any clothes other than a thin *maxtatl* or loincloth, had preserved a natural, proud poise. Their governor, wearing a rich *maxtatl*, but otherwise naked, beautiful and barefoot, carried their three maguey masks. Xuchitl and the three boys bowed ceremoniously and did not speak to each other. The boys, of course, preceded the girl and would have grinned with incredulous amusement had they been told by one of their astrologers that there were nations beyond the seas in which, as a matter of course, the girls had precedence over the boys.

Nezawal Pilli received his children with the grave demeanour which a father was required to keep in the presence of his offspring and bid them sit on low square stools covered with tiger or lion-skins. They made a semi-circle at his feet. He sat on an arm-chair made of reeds and also covered with a tiger-skin. He was clad in a snow-white mantle, and wore simple shoes and no jewels. It was cool, for the

tying up of the sheaf took place in January, but, in accordance with his people's beliefs, the king had put out the fire which always burned charcoal and incense in a copper brazier in his room. There were a few hours to while away before the Pleiads passed the Meridian, a sign for the Mexican priests to kindle the New Fire. Nezawal Pilli wanted to spare his children the atmosphere of superstitious terror which would prevail even in his palace during those hours, yet he felt unable to say too much or do too little, fearing an innocent indiscretion of his children might give him away as an unbeliever and cause offence to his people and priests. He thought it wiser to work by a slow and discreet permeation of word and deed towards more enlightened days.

He first diverted the attention of the three boys and the girl by asking them questions about their own lives. Cacama, who was fourteen, reported on his progress in the handling of weapons. The two younger boys had been learning to play the difficult game of *tlachtli*, a kind of tennis, played with a rubber ball which could be touched with neither hands nor feet, but only with the hip, protected by a special "hip-leather"; and while they were pleased at their progress in returning the ball across the middle line, they wondered how professional players could ever succeed in shooting it through the hole in a stone-ring which stood between the players, a feat which was the crowning achievement of the game.

"I have never seen it done," said Vanilla-Face.

"Nor I," seconded Cohuanacoch.

"But you, Cacama . . ." put in the King.

"Yes, sir. I did see it once, with you, two years ago. The player was a soldier. I remember he was taken a prisoner that year in the Holy War and was sacrificed by the Tlaxcalans."

Xuchitl looked at her father with eyes bursting with news.

"Yes, Xuchitl."

The boys were not surprised, for they knew their father to be peculiar, but they disliked that a girl should be so lacking in modesty as to wish to speak in the presence of four men.

"Citlali says . . ." The boys smiled at each other. What! Were they to listen to chambermaid's stories? ". . . that every man who shoots a ball through the stone-ring is sure to die a bad death, for Xolotl who is the god of the game does not want any man to win."

"And what do you think about it?" asked the King, by way of teaching his boys to talk to women.

"I think that if Xolotl is so powerful that he can kill any man who puts a ball through the ring, it would be easier for him to prevent the player from doing it."

"We must not question the acts of the gods," said Cacama, who was pious.

The King hit a gong with a small metal hammer which hung from the back of his chair. A silent slave, phantom-like, stood at the door. To the utter astonishment of the boys and even of Xuchitl, who knew her father better, Nezawal Pilli said :

"Bring us supper here, as ordered."

The King always ate alone. Xuchitl never ate at the same table with the boys. Nezawal Pilli did not explain, even though he saw the astonishment which his order had caused in his children. The servant was swiftly and smoothly laying before each of them a cushion to act as a table, with a fine china service on it painted with elaborate designs representing the life of Nezawal Coyotl, the poet-king. Five maids brought copper services of basins and jugs for each of the diners to wash his hands.

When they retired, the King, in a dignified voice but without solemnity, said simply, "We offer this meal to our Lord Quetzalcoatl, in whose service we wish to live." The servant then brought a cold supper, for no fire had burned at the Palace since morning. He presented a huge hen-pie to the King, and proceeded to carve it with an obsidian knife. The King, in a light mood, asked Xuchitl : "Well ! You have not told us yet what it is Citlali thinks of Quetzalcoatl." The servant offered the hen-pie. The King and his children ate with their hands. While her father and brothers helped themselves, Xuchitl, with her eyes on a figure of Quetzalcoatl painted on her plate, wondered where to begin. "She told me some stories about him, but I don't remember them all." She felt less free to speak her mind in the presence of her haughty and critical brothers than when she was alone with her father.

"Let us hear some of them," said the King. The boys ate in silence. The servant offered Xuchitl some pie. She helped herself and said :

"Quetzalcoatl was a great lord who governed in Tulla. His skin was white and he had a long black beard." This made Cohuanacoch laugh, but he stifled his chuckle with his hand, out of respect for his father. The King asked him :

"What is it you find funny, the white skin or the black beard ?" The boy blushed and did not answer, for he was shy, but Vanilla-Face, who was somewhat rash and unruly, answered for him : "He must have looked like a sick woman who wore her hair under her chin." The two boys laughed, but Cacama frowned so hard that his father asked him : "What is the matter, Cacama ?" "Jokes," answered Cacama, "are not welcome to the gods, and if they heard us they might stop the stars to-night and kill us all."

The servant, who was handing round fruit—red and yellow *tzapotes*, sweet potatoes and fruity roots—trembled slightly. The King realised it. His mind came back to the solemn hour his subjects were living and he thought it wiser to restrain his own tendency to make light of popular beliefs.

"The gods must be respected and worshipped. Quetzalcoatl was a great spirit, perhaps greater than we realise. What else does Citlali know about him?"

Xuchitl told all she knew. But the King, who had listened in silence, felt a grave mood overtake his soul, and his fine, crystal-like features were so translucent with a kind of luminous sadness that his four children felt it and cast on him furtive glances of respect and wonder. The servant had put before them porcelain jars of frothy cold *chocolatl* made with cocoa and honey. Nezawal Pilli quietly beckoned him to leave the room. The wise king was perhaps more influenced than he himself realised by the nihilistic mood into which the whole nation was cast by these, the last hours of a dying age. He looked at his children—at the simple and light-hearted Cohuanacoch, the turbulent and unruly Vanilla-Flower-Face; at Cacama, the brave and pious Cacama; and at Xuchitl, the flower of his life, and he seemed to hesitate. Should he speak?

"You must know," he began . . . he had inadvertently chosen an *acayell* or tobacco-cane, from a box close by, and not till he saw the astonished eyes of Cacama glued to it did he realise that there was no fire to light it with, "You must know," he said smiling at his own absent-mindedness, "that both the story of Quetzalcoatl and the traditional ceremonies of the tying up of the Sheaf are revelations of deeper truths which are conveyed in this way from leader to leader above the people, as fires convey news above the valleys from hill-top to hill-top. Quetzalcoatl perpetuates the memory of some outstanding leader, teacher of arts, crafts and virtues, who came from far-off lands and went away again, probably beaten off by our own chiefs. There is a prophecy that he will come back. This means that men of his nation will come back—which is very likely, because the earth is very big and we occupy but a small part of it."

He was silent, for a while. His eyes were lost in the contemplation of a deep blue sky studded with stars.

"In a little while, the priests of Mexico will have reached the top of the Sacred Hill. There the New Fire will be kindled." He stopped again. He was thinking of the barbarous way in which this symbolic ceremony of reborn life was performed, by opening the chest of a victim with an obsidian knife and offering the panting heart to the gods. "We must climb to the tower and see the race of the torch-bearers."

He rose and walked to the door, followed by the three boys and the girl. The terrace was small, and they stood close together. Over their heads, the starry sky radiating mystery ; below, the dark sheet of the cool lagoon, guessed rather than seen ; darker still, here and there, to the west the low hills of the opposite coast and to the east, the peninsula of Iztapalapa, where the sacred hill would soon flare up with the New Fire, and on which were now centred thousands upon thousands of anxious eyes. "Remember this sight," he said to his children. "Men owe their fire to the gods ; but they have to kindle it themselves." From the tower, they could see the heap of wood and copal incense erected in the main courtyard, which would presently be lighted up by a torch brought by the King's chief courier. "I have thought a good deal over Quetzalcoatl. As we tie the Sheaf every fifty-two years, and as I believe that Quetzalcoatl's return cannot be far off, this may be the last time this ceremony is performed."

All four were longing to ask why, but none dared.

"The new men," he explained, "will come from the east, because in our legend, Quetzalcoatl leaves us by sea, towards the east. He spreads his mantle on the water and it becomes a boat made of serpents, which takes him away. They will have new ways, and will not believe in . . . look !"

A blaze had suddenly flared up on the hill of Iztapalapa. Thousands of hearts beat quicker ; thousands drove maguey-thorns into their arms or tongues and sprinkled their blood towards the New Fire. And presently here and there and everywhere torches were running down the valley and spreading in all directions till they were so many that the night was lit up with a kind of trembling twilight. The King and his children were so immersed in the sight that they did not notice what was happening at their feet. The king's courier ran, torch in hand towards the palace, but to his astonishment another torchbearer ran after him, passed him, ran forward in front of him. The dwellers of the palace and hundreds of neighbouring householders had congregated in the courtyard to see the New Fire arrive and kindle the wood-pile which waited also in the dark. Suddenly, the narrow alley left open for the courier was lit up by a torch ; a man rushed past the onlookers, panting, torch in hand ; he set fire to the wood and fell to the ground, exhausted. Three-Reeds looked down : "Ixkawatzin !" he exclaimed. He gave a few quick, sharp orders, to have him properly attended to and went upstairs to report the matter to the King.

Citlali had been instructed to return to the king's apartments as soon as the palace fire had been lit. She was punctual, and with Aztec patience, squatted on the mat in one of the anterooms and waited. The flares and torches had been lit up again throughout the palace and, while the lofty roofs remained in darkness, the polished floors and decorated walls were alive in patches of quivering light separated by pools of gloom. A man entered the room coming from the men's wing of the building. She recognised Xiuhtotitl or Firebird, the tutor of the princes, who came also to fetch his wards. He sat by her and said, "I have just heard her again!" "Whom?" whispered Citlali. "The ghost-queen. Now I feel certain she comes back to haunt her past loves. God knows what life she lives in those rooms with the images of all her lovers about!" "Be quiet!" implored Citlali. "Suppose she heard you!" Then with a curiosity which conquered both her fear and her logic, she asked: "Are you sure that you heard her?" With his eyes on the floor, as if he were not speaking at all, and his lips almost motionless lest the ghost were looking, he answered: "I was coming from the courtyard to return to the men's quarters before coming here, and had to pass by . . . the door. I was tempted to stop and listen. She was groaning. It might have been anything, death or lust. That groan was full of her." He drew close to Citlali and whispered, "I recognised her voice!"

There was a silence. The lights went on casting flickering, weird shadows on the contorted decorations of the walls. "Do ghosts have the same voice as persons down here?" asked Citlali. "Don't know. But this ghost's voice is the Wanton Queen's right enough."

Every now and then, Firebird and Citlali glanced at the heavy curtain which separated them from the inner rooms, lest the King overheard them, which they were sure would have meant instant death for them. But the King was still beholding the night with his four children. "A new life begins again," he was saying. "Out of that one spark which sprang from the fire-kindler in Iztapalapa, all the fires in our country will be reborn. It is a beautiful tradition," he said, with his eyes on Cacama, "but we who stand on the top of the hill of the people, we must not take it naively as they do. We must delve under the surface, and bring out its meaning. If we had not put out our fires we would not have to rekindle them again. This ceremony means that every Sheaf must bring in a renewal of our life and spur us on to seek the new spirit in the heart of things. That is why we light the New Fire on the heart of a victim." He was silent and grew sad again. The stars were as clear and as beautiful as ever, and he

feasted his eyes on them. "But, even if the fire is new, the wood is old, always the same . . . always the same. And it is so opaque in itself that it can only give forth light by being consumed. Now, remember, boys, remember, Xuchitl, such is man and woman also. We give forth light only by burning away. . . ." He looked at his four children successively. They were puzzled and pensive. They had never heard him in that mood. "Come. It is late. You must have some sleep."

He sighed, rose to his full majestic stature and pulled up his white cotton mantle which had fallen from his sculptural shoulder. "Where is Xuchitl? Give me your hand. Let us go back again to the world of men and women and leave the stars to themselves."

13

The King and his children entered the hall from the side whence they were not expected. Citlali and Firebird sprang to their feet, bowed low and took charge of their respective wards. The King, erect, one hand on the heavy curtain of his own apartments, let them go pensively.

Citlali and Xuchitl walked away hand in hand. Both were wrapped in their thoughts—Citlali full of the ghost of the Wanton Queen, whom she had known well in life and whose dramatic death she remembered vividly; Xuchitl dreaming about her father's words, wondering how to keep apart the world which he revealed to her and that in which Citlali, everybody in fact save her father, lived around her. As they walked on through dimly lit halls from torch to torch, they saw one of Yeicatl's assistants coming towards them, shepherding his flock of pregnant women back to their quarters. They were unmasked and each carried her maguery-mask in her hand. Xuchitl noticed then that in order to let them pass she and Citlali had to step aside and enter the space usually shut off by the three curtains which all the year round hung before the door of the haunted apartments. (Evidently, she thought, the curtains had been thrown into the lake.) They had gradually receded into the side passage till they were close to the gilt decorated door of the Wanton Queen's rooms. But some subconscious curiosity made her keep the discovery to herself, for Citlali, absorbed in her own dreams, had not observed it. And even as she was secretly enjoying this discovery, a voice tense with an emotion beyond hope and joy, a voice which did not seem to enter her soul through her ears, but to blow through her like a blast of stormy wind, spread terror in her being and made her shake like a leaf: "Oh come! Oh come

again!" Xuchitl waited for the suffering of the next wail, which she was sure would come. And the ghostly voice again pierced her being and made her tremble and shiver all over. "Oh come again, my heart! My heart of jade!"

14

Citlali, pale and shaking, dragged her away without a word, dreading at every step that the ghost of the unhappy queen would seize hold of them and spirit them away into the eerie place where ghosts dwell, forlorn and desolate. Panting with fatigue and emotion, they arrived safely at last in Xuchitl's rooms and let themselves fall on the soft cushions strewn over the mat. Xuchitl, used to earlier hours, felt her girlish bones aching in her tired body but was too excited to sleep. Citlali was taught with the sense of an actual lived experience, echoing in her soul with the words of the wanton ghost: "Oh come, oh come again!" Whom did she want? Was she not there in the company of all her lovers, in those apartments which she had made famous by her secret debaucheries?

"Citlali!" She was shaken out of her dream by the girl's voice and found Xuchitl's eyes shining with curiosity. "Did you hear that voice? It was . . . hers!"

Citlali could not refrain from an instinctive glance backwards. "I did not know," the child went on, "that . . . they had voices."

The plural pleased Citlali. It seemed to reassure her, as if the ghost she was fearing at the time, no longer directly concerned in the conversation, would lose sight of them. There was no light burning in the room, but the window let in the glow of the huge fire which Ixcawatzin had kindled in the yard and which was still burning with an acrid-sweet smell of dry pine and copal incense. Citlali followed up that plural, which made her feel safer.

"They do. They nearly always speak. Sometimes, when a brave soldier or a priest happens to be in the woods at night, he hears a noise as if someone were cutting wood. He runs towards the noise and soon gets hold of the ghost, whose chest is open, and has doors, right and left, and they clap together and that is what makes the noise." Xuchitl would have questioned these marvels on any other occasion; but that night, after that ghost, ready for any mystery, she listened with ears and eyes to the story which Citlali told her, perhaps to forget that other story uncomfortably close to them both. "When the doors are open, you can see the ghost's heart. The thing to do then is to seize hold of it and never let it go. Then you ask the ghost to give you something and he has to. At first, of course, he tries to

send you away with words : ' Oh valiant man ' he says, ' my friend, leave me, and I shall give you whatever you desire ! But you must not let go.' ' I shall not let go now that I have caught you.' That is the thing to say. Then the ghost says : ' Here is a maguey-thorn,' but the brave soldier waits till he gets four, and that is a sure sign of victory and power and wealth."

" And then," asked Xuchitl, " does he let the ghost go ? "

" Yes. But other times, it is best not to argue with him, but as soon as you have seized hold of his heart, you pull hard and run away with it, and when you arrive home, you wrap it up in some cotton till the next day, and never look at it till the morning. Of course, you may find a tuft of grass or a handful of earth in the cotton next morning ; that means that you will be poor and unhappy. But if you find some feathers, or maguey-thorns, that means you will be rich."

They were both lulled to sleep by these old tales, and dropped off on the cushions without taking the trouble to go to bed.

15

The King sat down on his tiger-skin chair, facing the window through which he could see the stars and guess the dark, cool lagoon. He felt for an acayetl or tobacco-cane, lit one at the torch which burned close to his chair and let himself glide into a meditative reverie. In a tall, polished stone mirror which stood in the corner of the room, he saw the curtain drawn aside and Three-Reeds waiting for a word of encouragement to advance.

" What is it ? "

Three-Reeds told all he knew about Ixcawatzin's exploit. " He has not come to yet. I am not sure whether he is fast asleep, or in a faint, or . . . no, he is not dead."

Nezawal Pilli was thinking it over. Why should this budding soldier-priest outrun his courier in order to bring the New Fire to the palace ? The King thought of his daughter. What mysterious link connected these two beings ? But Three-Reeds waited. " Let him sleep in comfort. To-morrow morning send him to me."

Alone again. In the quiet of the night. So quiet that one could hear the soft lapping of the water of the lagoon on the steps of the landing stage, and now and then the low flight of an aquatic bird razing the water with wings and feet, in search of better sleeping quarters. From time to time the pine-torch in the corner crackled and spluttered. " The fire," he thought. " Born again." He smiled at his

countrymen's credulity. "Would they ever grow up and shed all their childish beliefs?" A thought seized him then which would often steal into his mind and make him uncomfortable. "I wonder how many childish beliefs I hold myself unawares! After all," he went on musing, "behaviour is the test of thought, and what is my behaviour? Am I freer than they are from the tyranny of sex? They call it the power of Tlaculteutil, the goddess of carnal love. Words. I know I can do nothing against It, whatever it is." He fell into a dream which rapidly became an obsession. He, the master of two thousand concubines, the actual husband of over forty picked girls amongst them, he knew that perfect love-bliss was almost unattainable—had he ever enjoyed it, even with his favourite Fruity Nipple? And yet it is always sought, ardently sought, with an ever reborn desire which disappointments never suffice to damp. He knew only too well that his meditation was but a flight of ghosts thrown on to the screen of his brain by his reborn desire, which in the dark solitude of the night was overpowering him, as it had done so many times since the death of Fruity Nipple had driven him to the forbidden, the atrocious, the hellish paradise of the Wanton Queen, the ghost reborn from her death, who held him—body, soul and spirit—in abject thralldom.

With trembling hands he leant on the arms of the chair and stood up, then went to an inner room, dimly lit by some stray reflections from the torch outside. He needed no light. From a cabinet set in the wall, he took a small casket and opened it by pressing a secret spot on the lid. There lay the object which he was seeking: the heart of jade, a lovely, shining, green chalchwiwl carved by some artificer in the shape of a heart, the present which his father Nezawal Coyotl had handed him on his deathbed. "Never try to seek love-bliss without it," the old king, as thirsty a lover as ever lived, had said to him. Nezawal Pilli threw the gold chain over his neck and hid the precious heart under his white mantle, then he stole through the silent, deserted halls. The quivering lights of the torches added an outer tremor to the inner tremor which upset the balance of his clear-cut features, and the life of his face seemed to have left his eyes and brow to swell the sensual lip and the trembling nostrils, shaken by uncontrolled desire. He stood a while, with his hand on his heart before the carved gilt door of the haunted apartments, then, with the swift movement of an expert hand, opened the secret lock and disappeared into the haunted halls.

Ixcawatzin was laid on a bed, still unconscious, and quietly passed from his swoon to a healthy sleep. But habit, stronger than fatigue,

woke him up a few hours before dawn. He rubbed his eyes, wondering where he was. All was quiet, and for a while he was unable to find his bearings in the world of hard things and facts from which he had wandered in his fluid sleep.

Gradually he remembered the events of the night : his request to be allowed to march in the procession towards the sacred hill ; the solemn march in the night ; his thoughts of coming death or, if the stars moved on, of a new life of devotion to the gods ; the arrival at the lower temple while the initiated marched on to the small temple at the top where Xiuhtlamin, the noble victim, was to be sacrificed and to become the panting altar on whose gaping, gory chest, the fire was kindled ; the tense waiting till the priest Master of the Science of the Skies sent word that the Pleiads had passed the Meridian ; the even tenser waiting till the first sparks of the new fire sprang from the fire-kindling instrument ; the flames throwing a reddish glow on to faces of the priests ; the trepidation which had entered his body from the earth, through his feet, and had shaken his heart, his throat, his brain, and had compelled him to seize a pine-torch at hand and rush to the flame, elbowing out all other priests ; the mad race downwards ; the wrong turn ; his fury on finding that the palace courier ran ahead of him ; his superhuman effort to outstrip his rival and his fall at the foot of the palace pyre, with the flame right on the copal layer at the top. Why had he done it ? Even now, he could not tell. All he had as a clue was that on the way his lips, in rhythm with his frantic steps, murmured :

“ Xuchitl ! Xuchitl ! Xuchitl ! ”

He glanced at the window. He could not tell the time for certain, for though the stars sparkled in a dry blue sky the landmarks thrown on the sky by his surroundings were unfamiliar. But he trusted his habits and he made up his mind to return to his early morning duties at the Calmecac. He rose, and walked softly on the polished floors with his subtle, bare feet. What was the quickest way out ? The palace gave him no hint, for it was equal to itself in every direction ; spacious, square, dignified, symmetrical, lit by the same torches in the same places, bathed by the same cool air which blew in through identical windows.

As he wandered, trusting to luck for a way out, he heard a shriek, muffled by some heavy curtain, he thought, but a shriek undoubtedly. He stopped dead and stood with his back to the wall. Opposite him, a door turned noiselessly on its hinges ; a man stepped out backwards somewhat mysteriously, shut the door and locked it in a way Ixcawatzin could not see, then turned round. Ixcawatzin was pale with emotion. Before the mysterious man had turned, he had already recognised the King, for no one but the King went about shod in the

palace ; but when he saw the king's face, upset as if a storm had made havoc of its features, bleeding from ears and neck and mouth, with his white mantle red with the blood that trickled from small wounds from his arms and chest, the youth felt a deep emotion surging in his soul towards the lonely and stately figure of the monarch.

Nezawal Pilli walked away without noticing Ixcawatzin's presence. This was a clue to the youth lost in the palace and he took a few steps in the opposite direction. But the king then felt the presence of the stranger, turned round sharply and asked, "Who is there?"

"Ixcawatzin, sir."

They walked towards each other and stood facing each other in body, miles apart in soul, under a torch which lit their faces with a smoky, resinous light, while through the window the far-off stars sparkled ethereal light on them.

"What are you doing here?"

"I was seeking the way out to return to my morning duties."

"Why did you hide from me?"

"I did not hide, sir. I respected the solitude of one coming from sacrifice and penance."

The King smiled faintly. Ixcawatzin had mistaken the bleeding scratches of a hellish love-battle for the scars of a sacrifice to the gods. "Well," thought the king, "he is not so very wide of the mark. It is a kind of sacrifice." Then, to him, "Come with me."

Ixcawatzin followed in the steps of the handsome king. Nezawal Pilli sat on his cane chair and bid his guest sit on an ycpalli in front of him.

"May I remain standing, sir?"

The King remembered that a young Elder Brother always took pride in remaining on his feet when circumstances prevented him from performing his early morning obligations.

"Why did you run from the Sacred Hill to light our fire?"

"I don't know, sir."

The King's first movement was one of irritation; then, his own inner man asked him: "Do you know why you yourself . . . ?" and he asked more calmly:

"Have you any explanation? . . . Had you planned it in advance?"

"No, sir." The youth saw the gold chain round the king's neck. He kept his eyes on it, he knew not why, endeavouring to guess what it was that hung from it under the white mantle, while on another level, his mind was busy with the king's query. "I was impelled to it. I asked to accompany the procession, but I had no idea that I would do what I did."

"What made you think of it? When did you decide and what were you thinking or seeing in your mind when you decided?"

Ixcawatzin watched the chain stubbornly. Two trickles of blood ran down with him its V.

"I made up my mind . . . No. I was pushed to it when I saw the red glow on the priests' faces, and at the time I was thinking of——" The mantle fell from the shoulder. The heart of jade, lit by the light of the torch, shone on the king's chest, a gem of green splendour bleeding with glistening, black drops of blood. The boy had lost his voice with the emotion of the discovery, and the King had to ask again, "Thinking of whom?"

"Of Xuchitl," he said simply. And he added, with equal simplicity, no task of confession, but as a fact: "All the way, while running, I said to myself: Xuchitl! Xuchitl! Xuchitl!"

Nezawal Pilli was thinking it over. There was an obvious *natural* link between Ixcawatzin and his daughter. He could not fathom the actual character of this link, but that it was in the nature of things was evident, for this boy never knew why he was driven to do things which in one way or another led him to Xuchitl.

"I believe," said Ixcawatzin spontaneously, as one desirous to co-operate in the clearing up of a mystery, "that I can remember a feeling that it was my duty to bring the New Fire to Xuchitl." He was silent for a moment, then, with a lesser assurance, he added: "I could not bear the feeling that the New Light should come to her through *human* hands."

"What is Xuchitl to you?" asked the king. There was no haughtiness in the question, no unkindness; just a request for information.

"The gods may know. I don't," he answered simply.

"Which is your god? I mean the one you serve more specially?"

"The Plumed Serpent."

Nezawal Pilli watched him in silence for a while. He was most handsome, the most handsome boy he could think of by far; and he was in dead earnest. One could see that by the scars of sacrifice which covered his body, but also in his metallic eyes, which did not shine but did not smile either, and in his set lips. "He will be one of those priests," thought the King, sizing him up, "who torture themselves with a knife rather than break their vow of chastity." Then, in a firm and solemn voice, he said to Ixcawatzin: "You must swear now that you will never reveal to any one what you have seen to-night."

"In the name of the Sun," rang the boy's voice, "and of Our Lady the Earth, I shall not fail to keep silent about what I have seen to-night, and in order to guard against it, I eat this earth." He

swiftly bent his knees, touched the floor and put his fingers in his mouth.

"To-morrow," ordered the King, "you will begin to teach Xuchitl the records of the past and the prophecies about the future. Talk to Three-Reeds about hours of work. I will see your masters in the Calmecac."

Ixcawatzin did not realise all that these words implied. Perhaps his imagination had not worked that way at all. For the moment he was impressed mainly by the ease with which the King had taken such a momentous decision. Yet, he dared not utter his doubts.

"What is it?" asked the King.

"Forgive me, sir. But . . . how about the omens? Are we sure that to-morrow——"

"I am." The King was final, yet without rebuke. "Come to-morrow and talk to Yeicatl."

"May I," asked Ixcawatzin after a silence, "return now to my duties in the monastery?"

"Do. I will show you the way." They crossed several halls and then the King said, "The front gate is there, where you can see the glow of the fire you yourself have kindled."

They parted. Ixcawatzin was overwhelmed. In his youthful heart he heard the echo of the solemn admonitions of his monkish teachers against the dangers of a close association with women. He walked with a steady step but with a concerned mind towards the gate, towards the new fire, towards the new day. "I must, above all, break the power of my own sex over my spirit," he thought in deadly earnestness.

17

All that night, Xuchitl lived in a world of dreams and nightmares, of fires, ghosts and gods. Her soul was a battlefield in which symbols and beliefs fought at close grips, as in the battles between her people and its neighbours, not to kill, but to seize prisoners alive for sacrifice. Though the struggle was confused and disorderly, she felt that in the main there were two hosts, one dark and terrible, one light and—well, at any rate the one she liked best. This host of light was led by her father. The host of wailing ghosts and grinning gods was commanded by Citlali and by a youth she could not name. He was handsome and brave, and his hard features spelt self-assurance and faith. She felt that her heart was in her father's army, but found herself, to her dismay, fighting on the side of the dark host, in whose midst the wailing voice of the ghost had dragged her. Yet, even this was not

quite certain. Nothing was certain on that battlefield. The two enemy forces were so mingled together that they seemed at times as if they changed sides or even as if they melted into one. Xuchitl followed the movements of the fighters (which she imagined in vivid detail in the style of the cotton-pictures of past wars which her father had shown her) with a puzzling double feeling of being both in the thick of the battle and altogether out of it. One thing was certain, the only certain thing, though even that was not clear, in the turmoil : the two hosts fought hard for her heart. It was Xuchitl's heart which was at stake. Yet, it was not her heart as she knew it alive, like a bird in the cage of her breast ; it was a motionless heart, green and glistening in the sky—a heart of jade.

The two armies fell upon her and heavily pressed her head and body down so that her back was splitting with pain. She woke up. She had fallen asleep curled up, with her face on her knees. Her room was filled with two scents : An acrid smell from burning pine and a sweet aroma of copal incense, blown in together from the fire in the yard into the room, struggling in her nostrils like the two hosts in her dreams. The yard outside was aglow with the glorious red of the walls opposite, a red almost alive, like a huge gash in a huge living body. She stretched herself on the brand new cushions and rested for a while. Her dreams came back to the surface of her being as soon as she lay flat. She rose to her feet and walked softly to the window. The night was losing colour and its silky, dark blue was turning to woolly grey. It was the hour before dawn, when ghosts trailed their long veils over the drowsy waters of the lagoon. The fire was still burning : a heap of red-hot ashes, shot through here and there with flames and small explosions. Xuchitl, still passive with sleep, let colours, shapes, aromas and the eerie suggestions of a space alive with phantoms, sink into her sensitive soul. She had relapsed so much into the mood of her dream that she was not in the least surprised when she saw the youth who during the night had commanded the host of darkness, come out from the main gate of the palace, walk towards the fire and stay there for a while, beholding the ashes and the flames. He stood so close to the fire that he looked like some figure of fire himself, some immortal god hewn in a block of flame by some ethereal artist. How beautiful he was, she thought, still half-awake, half-adream. And as she was dwelling on his perfect form, he unclasped his loincloth and appeared quite naked. Xuchitl remembered the story of Huemac's daughter and the Toveyan Indian who was in reality the god Tetzcatlipuca, disguised as the old magician Titlacaoan. Her eyes were glued on the youth's sex, revealed by his gesture. The youth meanwhile punished himself cruelly with a maguey-thorn. Not a muscle of his face stirred ; but the pain had shot through Xuchitl's

body and soul, and tears came to her eyes. He collected blood in his fingers and sprinkled it on the fire, murmuring words which she could not hear, then put on his loincloth again and melted away into the grey forenoon. She remained there standing, dreaming, sleeping.

Next morning, Citlali found her huddled up close to the window on the hard wooden floor, so drunk with sleep that she was able to lay her on her bed without awakening her.

18

All the morning, Xuchitl stayed in bed sleeping restlessly. Citlali noticed that the child was feverish and that she often muttered in her sleep. She had no doubt that some evil spirit had overpowered her. Yeicatl called towards midday to inquire when he could bring Ixcawatzin. "What for?" asked Citlali.

"The King has ordered him to teach Xuchitl all about stories and prophecies."

"There was no need of a budding priest for that," grumbled Citlali. "At any rate," she added, pleased for once with Xuchitl's sickness, "he can't come to-day." And she pointed to the girl lying on her floor-bed. "Nothing very serious. Any sorcerer could put it right in a whiff. But I dare say the King——"

"The King knows more than any sorcerer," asserted Three-Reeds, and he left the room just a trifle huffy.

Nezawal Pilli came to see his daughter. She was asleep. He touched her forehead and her heart and said to Citlali: "Nothing but rest. Little food. No visits. No talks. And above all, no stories which might excite her."

Citlali was very much pleased. It meant the postponement of the visits of the new teacher.

Towards evening, Xuchitl felt more awake and seemed even desirous to speak. "Your father says you must keep quiet."

"But Citlali, I cannot keep the inside of my head quiet, can I? I can keep my head quiet on the pillow. But the inside keeps humming like a bee-hive. Tell me. Answer me."

"Answer what?"

"I want to know whether you think that I am sick of the same sickness as the daughter of King Huemac." She kicked with impatience under her sheets. "You know!"

"Of course, not."

"But why?"

"King Huemac's daughter saw a man, a real man. You have been dreaming."

"I don't think so, Citlali." She sat up in bed. "It is true I saw him in my dreams, in the battle; but last night, when he took off his loincloth and pierced himself, I saw him, yes, actually;" and she emphasised her certainty with a pretty gesture of the head.

Citlali was beginning to wonder. "But you say he was made of fire . . ."

Xuchitl herself was not very sure. "Yes. He looked like a man of flames, but only when he was near the fire. No. I am sure he was not a god, nor a ghost." There was a silence. "But then . . . Tell me . . . Am I sick like the daughter of King Huemac?"

"Did you . . . When you were looking at . . . him, after he bared himself . . . did it tickle between your legs?" asked Citlali. Xuchitl tried to remember. "I . . . I can't remember."

"Then it didn't," said Citlali firmly. "If it had, you would remember for the rest of your life. So you are not sick like Huemac's daughter. You are too young yet."

19

When Ixcawatzin knew that his first meeting with Xuchitl had been postponed because the princess was sick, he felt that King Nezawal Pilli was not as good an omen-guesser as he fancied himself to be. The King himself thought that had he been less battered by his own storms at the time, he would have reflected that his little daughter could not have stood unscathed the emotions of that New Fire night, even though he was unaware of the most ravaging experiences which Xuchitl had lived through during the first hours of the new Sheaf.

Nezawal Pilli was thus given an opportunity to reconsider the decision he had taken impulsively that night. He came to the conclusion that his instinct had been wisely inspired. It was obvious that there was a natural force which drew Ixcawatzin towards Xuchitl, and the reasonable thing was to follow nature and to open a channel for this force. Ixcawatzin was seven years older. He was of an upright and generous character and would be able to act as her protector on many occasions on which her father might not be available. It was wise gradually to attach Ixcawatzin to Xuchitl's service. True, he would be bigoted and narrow-minded in religious matters, but she would easily deal with that.

On the other hand, Nezawal Pilli reflected that such a change in

Xuchitl's life should be brought about under his own aegis, and should not be left to any underling. He had his daughter summoned to his presence and explained to her as much of the position as he thought wise. Xuchitl was delighted, both because she was going to be taught to read the secret holy books, and because she was to meet a new human being, and she was a curious little person. She longed to ask "when?" but was prevented from doing so by the severe etiquette which ruled the relations between parents and children. She was, however, more than rewarded by hearing that her new teacher, Ixcawatzin, a half-cousin of hers, was due to arrive in a few moments. She was flushed with excitement, standing before her father, and, as a matter of fact, peeping out of the corner of her eye at an image of her neat self on the long stone-mirror which stood massively on the left behind her father's chair. Suddenly, her astonished eyes saw the captain of the host of darkness advance towards her image in the polished space of the stone, stop and remain standing behind her without a word or a movement, taking no notice whatever of her presence there, though they were ever so close to each other beyond the smooth surface of the stone. She grew pale with the emotion of the unknown, then red with the memory of the scene by the fire in the yard, which had made her fear that she might be sick of Huemac's daughter's sickness. She wandered back to the night of her bad dreams and was away in dreamland while her father bade Ixcawatzin come in and received him with kind words, and she landed at last from her flight, but not till his voice rang for the third time: "Xuchitl! Xuchitl! Xuchitl!"

"Yes, sir," she answered faintly.

"What is the matter?" The King was puzzled by the behaviour of his daughter, while Ixcawatzin was convinced that an evil spirit was about, thwarting this business from the outset, or else that the gods were not pleased at his being diverted from his monastery to teach a little girl.

"This is Ixcawatzin." Xuchitl had regained her self-control and bowed graciously. "I want you to listen to him with the respect due to a teacher. He will show you the meaning of pictures and will recite our old stories to you."

"Yes, sir." She could not help wandering from the world of material facts to that stormy world of emotions which her little body was then carrying, not without difficulty. That her teacher should walk out of her dreams, through a mirror, into her daily life, was too natural for her to worry, or even to think, about. She had been surprised, but not taken aback. Dreams were for her as real as day-facts and ghosts as real as persons. What upset her was that her father, who was the captain of the host of light, should give her over

to the captain of the host of darkness ; and something in her inmost self, down there in the pit of her stomach, told her that she would never be able to communicate with Ixcawatzin.

Both the King and her teacher put down her brooding silence to girlish shyness. "Begin to-day . . . Right now," said Nezawal Pilli, anxious to break the ice.

"I have no books with me," said Izcawatzin.

The King withdrew to his inner room to fetch some sacred books. Ixcawatzin and Xuchitl remained alone. He withdrew to a respectful distance. As he stepped, though softly, barefoot on the polished wood of the royal floor, she was betrayed by her curiosity, and for the first time cast her eyes on him. There, close to her, so close that she could almost touch it, stood the lithe, svelte body, naked but for the loincloth. Arms and legs were studded all over with the scars and crusts of sacrifice. But the line, the poise, the modelling, the proportions, were a joy to her sensitive eye which wandered over him with an innocent pleasure spied upon and doggedly followed by an animal lust still self-ignorant, yet self-assertive, an animal lust which succeeded in making her stare at the loincloth. She knew now what was hidden under that cloth and how it had been wounded. Her heart was beating quicker and she felt flushed and uncomfortable when the king returned.

He brought a "book" composed of a long band of cotton-cloth divided in pictures the size of our ordinary pages and folded alternately to the right and to the left, the whole protected by two wooden covers held together with copper clasps. "Here is the Book of the Deeds of Tetzcuco," said Nezawal Pilli. "It will teach Xuchitl both the meaning of picture-words and the deeds of her ancestors."

Xuchitl's lessons took place in the morning, in one of the loveliest rooms of her apartments, known as the Blue Lagoon Cabinet because its walls were covered with silky cotton hangings on which a blue lagoon, peopled with aquatic birds, had been embroidered in feather-work by most skilful artists. There was a large window opening out towards the woods behind the palace. Xuchitl and Ixcawatzin sat together on an ycpalli or low double seat, before a long table on which the sacred book lay open, a few pages at a time, leaving the two heavy wooden covers on the floor. There was also on the table a sheet of thick henequen paper, on which Ixcawatzin painted illustrations and examples with a brush which he chose from a set standing in a porcelain

jar ; next to which, like a gay troop of children close to their white-robed mother, stood a row of little china pots of all kinds of colours, each full of ink the colour of its coat.

Still lower down, Citlali sat on the mat, between Xuchitl and the window. She had a big basket of clothes in front of her and a smaller basket with maguey and bone needles and a battery of cotton balls of all kinds of colours.

There was quite a rivalry between the balls of coloured cotton and the coloured pots. "Yes," said the balls, "we know we do not shine and are rather soft and humble, but we do not break as easily as you do ; and moreover, we weave ourselves into the stuff of things, while you just wash the surface of fragile papers ; and while we act, you just talk. We live in fact what you may some day merely tell. So, you need not look down on us with that supercilious air."

Perhaps it was not in the cotton balls that these thoughts were actually brewing ; they might possibly be humming in an obscure way within the brain of poor Citlali, very much out of it in the new atmosphere of high knowledge and complicated argument which had invaded her once simple life with Xuchitl since the young scholar-soldier-priest had been put in charge of the girl's education. And then, was it wise to let Xuchitl sit close to the youngster after all those dreams—if they were dreams—which Xuchitl could not have forgotten ?

Meanwhile, Xuchitl worked hard and enjoyed her work. She was so curious that she absorbed all the tales about her great-grandfather Ixtlilxochitl or Vanilla-Flower-Face and about her grandfather Nezawal Coyotl or Fasting-Dog, with a true relish. It was moreover a joy to find that, little by little, she was beginning to decipher the books, actually to read their meaning and to build up a sequence of recorded facts in what looked at first like an arbitrary collection of signs and pictures.

But there was more in it than mere curiosity and intellectual sport. Though unaware of it, she sought the morning lessons as a release from the growing tension which she felt within her soul. The world was not a place where you just *were*. It was a place in which you were pulled about this way and that by powers which you could not ignore. Every now and then, while sitting next to Ixcawatzin she felt the power which emanated from his body and penetrated her through her skin. She did not know how. At first, she identified this power with his smell. Ixcawatzin, like all Aztec youths brought up in the Calmecac, was scrupulously clean and always came to his pupil fresh from his bath. His naked body had an aroma of its own, but a clean, an almost fragrant aroma which, though strange at first, had become a pleasure

for her. Once, in an effort to catch the book which was slipping away to one side, she had touched him and the actual feel of his skin had shaken her all over. She did not know that these ripples and wavelets on the smooth surface of her sensibility were but mild forerunners of later storms. She was not attracted by Ixcawatzin. She still saw in him the captain of the host of darkness, a form of life borrowed from her dreams, which she was unable to define ; and she disliked his earnestness, his certainty, his conformity, without realising that it was precisely all this that she disliked in him.

Yet, oddly enough, since Ixcawatzin had appeared in her life, she felt less closely in touch with her father. She had been put out by her father's choice of his enemy (in her dreams) as her teacher ; moreover, all the forms of life against which her father stood in her imagination, and which she had till then personified in Citlali, were now much better incarnated in Ixcawatzin, whose intellectual dignity—she felt obscurely—was on a par with her father's ; and this fact had, of course, strengthened the host of darkness in the battlefield of her soul.

Finally, there was the ghost. She held for certain that ghosts were on Ixcawatzin's side. She had never discussed ghosts with her father, yet she knew, though she would have been unable to say why, that ghosts were against him. Now, there was a ghost in the palace. That could not be doubted. And she, Xuchitl, had heard her dismal voice. Xuchitl felt that the way for her pointed towards that ghost. Neither her father with his stars nor Ixcawatzin with his pictures and inkpots were in a position to satisfy her craving for a knowledge which, she felt, only the ghost possessed. Xuchitl made up her mind that she would strive to find the ghost out and talk to her.

This decision, however, though not lost, was soon buried under a daily round of activities. The morning was devoted to work : learning to grind maize, to sew, to weave and to embroider with Citlali ; to read the records and to learn the history of her ancestors with Ixcawatzin. The afternoon was set aside for pleasure : rowing on the lagoon or on the miniature lake which Nezawal Pilli had made in the palace grounds, playing with other girls of the numerous royal household or visiting friends. There was one of these visits which Xuchitl enjoyed above all others : she loved to spend long hours in the house of Cevalli (or Shadow), Citlali's sister. Shadow was younger than Citlali and just as handsome. She was married and had a little son,

Quachichitl or Sparrow, the magnet which drew Xuchitl to the house. Sparrow was just three. He was gay, sprightly, talkative within his limited means, and a most affectionate little fellow. He was allowed to toddle about at liberty over the house and wore no clothes whatever, winter or summer.

When Xuchitl came with Citlali to Shadow's house, she left at the door all pretence of being an important little person, precocious as royal little persons are bound to be, but also by a gift of nature, and grave because of the many thoughts which were already burdening her young mind. She became a child again and forgot her cares. She went on all-fours, sat on the mat and played for hours with Sparrow, building him out of his basket-toys a world of makebelieve as plausible as that in which grown-ups were made to move and much more lovable. Often, she took the child in her arms, enjoying maternal emotions, stronger and deeper for her ignorance of the true source of the felicity which in those moments filled her whole being. Gradually, Xuchitl had grown to think of the little Sparrow as of a life belonging to her.

22

In the morning, however, she became serious again. She followed with a passionate interest the romantic adventures of her grandfather Nezawal Coyotl or Fasting-Dog, beginning with the statement of his birth, which made her interrupt Ixcawatzin's reading with a cry of surprise: "In the year 1-Rabbits, on the day 1-Deer, at dawn, Prince Fasting-Dog was born to Vanilla-Flower-Face, heir to the throne of Tetzcuco, who was then twelve years of age."

"But," cut in Xuchitl, "that cannot be. Twelve!"

"Oh yes," said Citlali, who watched carefully over her right to take part in the proceedings, "a brother of mine had his first son when he was twelve. The younger the better."

Ixcawatzin listened in silence, saving arguments for better uses. He went on, reading the history of Fasting-Dog, packed with dangers, disasters, escapes, brave deeds and finally victory. A bad old man, Tezozomoc, tyrant of Azcapotzalco, had usurped his father's throne and relentlessly persecuted father and son, till King Vanilla-Flower-Face had died of his wounds; but Fasting-Dog had escaped and successfully eluded the tyrant's soldiers with the connivance of his subjects, who loved his youth and his adventurous spirit. How many times did her heart ache with impatience till she heard that the youthful prince had escaped safely from the bundle of cotton wraps, or from the sheaf of maize, in which he had been hidden! How proud she

felt when she heard that the tyrant Tezozomoc had dreamt in the year 12-Rabbits that Fasting-Dog had become a royal eagle which tore his head with its claws and ate his heart ! She wept on hearing Izcawatzin with his even, serene voice, read the massacre of the innocents, when Tezozomoc had sent bands of soldiers over the whole kingdom of Tetzcuco, with orders to kill all the children who would answer "Nezawal Coyotl" to the question "Who is the lord of this land ?" She was thrilled when she heard how Maxtla, Tezozomoc's successor, as cruel as his father, had contrived to give a dance in honour of Fasting-Dog (Nezawal Coyotl) with orders to have him murdered ; and how a peasant, who looked like the prince, after a few lessons on manners and elegance, was sent to the brilliant festival, where he was knocked down and beheaded ; and how, when Maxtla's messengers arrived with what they thought was Nezawal Coyotl's head before the King of Mexico, to terrorise him with the gruesome proof of Maxtla's might, they found Nezawal Coyotl in person talking to the king and went back to their master with more terror than they had hoped to cause. And finally she felt proudest and happiest of all when she heard Izcawatzin, no less happy and proud, read the story of the last battle of the Mexicans against Maxtla's troops, and, after those dreadful moments of doubt when the Mexicans, feeling the game was up, had even declared themselves ready to kill their three leaders—Itzcoatl, King of Mexico, Montezuma the Elder, their captain general, and Nezawal Coyotl—to please the enemy, the three leaders had fought alone against the whole army of Maxtla, until their own troops, fired by their heroic example, had rushed ahead and conquered. "Then," Ixcawatzin read on, with his even, serene voice, "the Mexicans entered Azcapotzalco in search of Maxtla, who was too proud to fight. The tyrant had hidden in one of his garden swimming baths. He was dragged out of his hiding-place and through the streets of his capital, to the market place where, in the presence of the army, Nezawal Coyotl cut his breast open, wrenched his heart from its infamous abode and offered it to the ghost of his father Vanilla-Flower-Face, leaving the body as carrion for the vultures."

Xuchitl shivered. She had followed the story as if it had been her own. She had made Nezawal Coyotl's cause her cause, his dangers her dangers, his sorrows her sorrows, his victory her victory. So that now, his hand was her hand raised to heaven with a panting heart in it, bleeding down his arm, down her arm. And she felt tears in her eyes at the thought that her grandfather was in her, right within her and within Izcawatzin, captain of the host of darkness, and within her father, captain of the host of light.

One afternoon as Xuchitl was in Shadow's house, playing with little Sparrow on the mat while the two sisters talked about their husbands—Long-Face, departed, as they thought, and Tsoyatl or Palm, who was away at the wars, for he was a professional soldier—a dark figure blotted out the light of the street door. Shadow grew pale. She had recognised a priest of the worship of the Tlalocs, the gods of rain. The sacrifices were due the following day.

"How old is that child?" asked the priest.

"He is just three," Shadow answered with a trembling voice and an anxious glance at her sister.

"Let me have a look at his head."

The Tlalocs were inaccessible deities who dwelt on top of the high mountains, hidden in the clouds; and as it was out of the whirlwinds in the clouds that they made the life-giving rain without which there was no maize. It was the duty of all to please them by offerings of specially selected victims. These victims were young children, because they were sure to cry when conveyed to the sacrificial stone, and the more they cried, the more rain would fall that year. Of all the children available, those most agreeable to the Tlalocs were those who had two twirls in their hair, for this was held to be an image of the whirlwinds dear to the rain-gods.

The priest had taken the child in his arms and was inspecting his hair. Shadow knew only too well what the result of the examination would be. He was an old man, wrinkled and shrivelled, with eyes like extinct volcanoes, hollows without light or colour or expression, and a few sparse long, white hairs, hanging from his chin. Xuchitl looked at him from the ground, straining her neck, and felt a repulsion which she could hardly conceal. The priest deposited the child on the ground. Little Sparrow was weeping abundant tears, which pleased the priest greatly.

"He has the sacred sign on his head, good woman," he said to Shadow, "and then, see how gloriously abundant are his eyes when he cries. Most welcome! Most welcome for the Tlalocs. Give him to me in the customary way; you shall get a good price for him. I dare say as much as two hundred almonds of cocoa."

Shadow was paralysed. She knew it was useless to protest, useless to weep. The sacrifice was an offering due to the community and, while every one would sympathise with her in her sorrow, no one would have anything but curses for her if she tried to oppose the will of the priests. Her eyes were filled with tears. She rushed to little Sparrow

and took him in her arms with an impulsive, almost a violent gesture, which made the child cry the more. Xuchitl wept in silence and Citlali frowned hard, determined not to yield to her emotion. The priest alone was calm and even indifferent. He knew that kind of scene to be inevitable, a part of the process, so far as he was concerned. He waited.

He then went quietly towards the door, stood there for a while and came back. Three young and hefty acolytes followed him and one of them took the child from his mother's arms before she realised what was happening. Xuchitl rose to her feet.

"Where are you going? Let me have that child," she ordered firmly.

Despite the noise of poor Sparrow's wails and shrieks, the acolyte perceived the authority in Xuchitl's voice and stood puzzled, looking at the priest.

"Who are you to speak to us like that?" asked the old man.

"I am the king's daughter," answered Xuchitl with self-assurance.

The priest was surprised and looked at Citlali.

"Princess Xuchitl," said Citlali without comment.

"You know, don't you?" asked the priest, "that the King does not tolerate any interference with the worship."

"I do," said Xuchitl. She was quivering with both fear and indignation. "But I am not interfering with the worship. I am asking you to leave that child alone until the King knows——" (knows what? . . . she wondered; and her heart prompted an admirable solution) "that his father is a soldier at war."

The priest thought it over and decided to take a middle course. "Very good," he said. "The child is not only a choice victim, but the best I have seen this year. He will remain here till the evening. Meanwhile the King will know of this." And he left the house followed by his three acolytes.

Xuchitl and Citlali lost no time in putting the matter before the King. Nezawal Pilli was in his work-room, reading some pictures which recorded the latest war-events. He received his daughter at once, while Citlali waited outside. Xuchitl put the matter to him in her usual, clear matter-of-fact way, and waited calmly for an answer which she felt sure would be favourable. To her dismay Nezawal Pilli looked concerned and on the whole negative.

"But, my little precious feather, I do not see at all on what grounds

I can intervene. You tell me the child has two twirls on his head and that he wept abundant tears. For the priests, those are signs that the Tlalocs prefer him to other children more dry-eyed and with a plainer pattern on their heads."

"But, sir, I love him," wept Xuchitl.

"I know, my precious jade, I know. But that only makes your sacrifice to the Tlalocs the more valuable. The people believe that the sacrifice of the children brings them rain. Suppose I yielded to you and stood out as the king who prevented an acceptable victim being offered to the Tlalocs, and the season turned out to be dry and there were a famine. How could we, you and I, face the people in their hunger?"

Xuchitl burst into tears.

25

The procession took place the next day. Every house in the town was decorated with a pole on top of which were set papers smeared with rubber in honour of the gods of rain. There were rows of them in front of the palace. The people watched most jealously how every man and woman behaved on this occasion and in particular expected the parents and family of the little victims to follow the procession to the end and to be present at the sacrifice. Xuchitl knew it. She knew that Citlali had gone to support her sister in her ordeal. The young princess was resolved not to shirk her duty and she was at the terrace, by the side of her father and brothers, when the procession passed under the palace windows. There was a dense crowd on both sides of the road—a motley crowd in which the feminine huipils stood out in all kinds of bright colours against the yellowish brown background of naked masculine bodies. All heads turned west, as first the rhythmic beat of the drums, then the frailer note of conch flutes, announced the arrival of the procession. Three white-clad priests, marching in single file, opened it; they were followed by the flute and drum players in two rows; then came the thirteen litters borne on the shoulders of acolytes, between every two of which marched a priest. These litters were small platforms with cotton awnings heavily, yet gracefully decorated with feather work, some green, some red, some white, some black. In each of them was conveyed one of the little victims, also richly dressed, in silky cotton wraps, the girls with embroidered petticoats and the boys with embroidered loincloths, necklaces of precious stone, beautiful, brightly coloured leather shoes, and paper wings stuck to their shoulder-blades. As they passed, one or two of them stunned by the inexplicable experience, but most of them pouring

tears from their swollen eyes, the women wept and the men felt buoyant at the sight of such abundant tears, a sure presage of a good harvest. Little Sparrow came last. He was in green, the colour of the fertile maize fields and of Jade-Glow the goddess of water. Gorgeous green feathers, glistening in the sun with the changing lights of the best silk, adorned his litter; green humming-bird feathers were woven in wavy designs on the wrap which covered his little body . . . and hid the ropes which tied him to the litter; from his neck dangled a long, heavy necklace of precious chalchihuitls, and on his little feet, his *cactli* of green tiger-skin, were liberally studded with green stones. He was a miserable sight of spiritual anguish, clad in material wealth and physical beauty.

As he passed by the terrace where Xuchitl stood, stiff and motionless, dry-eyed by a miracle of her will, her little maternal heart broke down and she fell backwards, unconscious. No one noticed it in the street. No one budged in the palace terrace till the procession had passed out of sight.

26

She was deeply upset. Quachichitl or Sparrow was the first branch which the hand of death had torn from the living trunk of her tender soul, and she felt the wound acutely because she was sensitive and still small. She was moreover impressed by her father's impotence, which came as a painful surprise to her, used as she was to seeing in him the source of power and the origin of reason. The thought was beginning to dawn upon her that there was something bigger, not merely more powerful, but vaster, wider, deeper, higher than the king's own majesty—a diffuse and undefined It, a big animal as it were, of which at most, the king would be the head or possibly the right arm; a huge It which knew what it wanted and always got it, an It which had devoured little Sparrow and would, if it wished, devour her some day. And she began to feel somehow that this battle between the host of light and the host of darkness which she had seen in her day-dreams and in her night-dreams also, as a fight within her own soul, was really being waged in the huge soul of the It-monster which now looked at her with the kind, lofty, slightly sad eyes of her father, now pierced her to the marrow with the terrifying stare of Witchilopochtli grinning at her with his row of square, grinding, white teeth.

She drifted from waking dreams overcast by gloomy meditations to sleep-dreams agitated by stormy nightmares in which little Sparrow, panting on the sacrificial stone, Ixcawatzin bleeding himself for chastity's sake, her father swallowed by the It-monster and the ghost

wailing in the night behind the thrice-curtained door surged and sank (as she herself used to do when swimming in the lagoon) between a black lagoon of liquid shadows and a vapour-laden air shot through by the trembling rays of an indolent sun.

She was not actually ill, but her father had given orders that she was to be kept in bed and came every now and then to see her. He came one afternoon several days after little Sparrow's death. Xuchitl was asleep, but she was not having an easy crossing. Her low couch of cotton covers laid on a mat was like a sea on which she was tossed to and fro by waves of emotion and winds of phantasy; every now and then she muttered words and even phrases: "Quachichitl. No. No. Quachichitl." Suddenly there was a silence. She lay on her back, held her breath. Her hands seized the bedclothes as a shipwrecked man a plank, and she gasped: "The heart of jade! . . . The heart of jade! . . ."

Her father was dumbfounded. He looked around the room. They were alone. He was on his knees, sitting on his heels; and there he remained watching her and wondering. How could she know of the existence of the secret stone? He was struck by the accent of despair, of longing, which had driven her breath as she shaped those words so magical for him. Averse though he was from any save the most matter-of-fact explanation of even the strangest happenings, Nezawal Pilli was gradually led to the belief that some ghost had seized hold of Xuchitl's body and was expressing itself through her. The King could think of two such ghosts: one was that of Queen Fruity-Nipple, the other was that of the Wanton Queen.

Xuchitl opened her eyes and smiled at her father. "I knew you were not drowned!" she said with less assurance in her voice than her words meant to convey.

"Why? Who said I was?"

Some inner force of which she herself was not fully aware made her draw herself in. She merely answered: "I must have been dreaming," and tried to dismiss the subject. "Do you remember anything of what you dreamt?" She cast her deep eyes on him with a glance in which there still lingered some of the light of her dreams, in which he appeared to her as unaccountable, mysterious, alien to her; and yet she smiled at him with her unfailing sweetness; and yet again, she answered: "No."

PART IV

ALONSO MANRIQUE GROWS UP BETWEEN THE SOFT AND
THE HARD WORLDS

I

BENEATH the grief reflected in his soul from the grief of his wife, Don Rodrigo was not a little relieved by the extirpation of the Jewish colony from Torremala. As the leader of the community, he knew only too well how difficult it was to prevent trouble while an alien group remained unassimilated under the envious eyes of the poorer Christians, and he was too shrewd not to realise that the calm, friendly attitude which his own class generally maintained towards the Jews had its roots precisely in the fact that it was too wealthy to envy them. He indulged in some wishful thinking which misled him into imagining that the expulsion of the unconverted Jews would bring about a kind of appeasement towards the converted ones. He ardently desired a complete and undisputed assimilation of those who, like his wife, had espoused the faith of Christ. This led him to a kind of defensive neglect of all the links which attached him to the Jewry, and, in particular, the two magic sticks from the rabbi's brother, the Moorish box which the rabbi had left in Father Guzmán's hands and even the lovely house in the old Jewry which he did not visit and kept closed for years, until the Jewish flavour had all but vanished from the whole district.

He was immersed in these thoughts and busy with the many problems created for his little community by the surgical operation which it had undergone, when one morning, early, almost at dawn, a messenger came to announce that the Very Magnificent Lord Don Cristóbal Colón, Admiral of the Indies, was to pass through Torremala towards midday. With a bewilderment shared by the whole of the Old World, Don Rodrigo had heard of the discovery made by his erstwhile guest, and while his ideas on this discovery were of the haziest (they were no hazier than those of the discoverer himself) he felt, as every one did in his day, that some striking revelation was about to be imparted to mankind by its Creator.

Later in the morning, as he was sitting in his study, he heard a distant hubbub. Down the avenue, all the youngsters of Torremala had gathered in a motley and riotous crowd. The day was bright

under a spring sun which brought out every note of colour in a strange and picturesque pageant. Four men on horseback opened the procession, playing on long silvery trumpets hung with crimson silk. They were followed by another horseman dressed in bright colours, who carried the banner of Castille, green, with the F for Ferdinand and the Y for Ysabel embroidered in gold. Then came the strangest men and women one had ever seen, for they were neither white nor black but had rich brown skins, well-shaped and comely bodies which the men showed shamelessly naked but for a loincloth, while the women wore a kind of tunic made of white cotton, yet so awkwardly that every one could guess it was not their custom to wear anything at all. Some of the men were adorned with gold chains round their necks, or with gold earrings or nose-rings. Others, of lesser standing, carried parrots and popinjays of the gaudiest colours, some of which, red and green and yellow, looked like fires on wings. By the side of these parrot-carriers, Calero had stepped into the procession with his usual earnest and businesslike air, and was carrying in his left hand a sparrow to the tail of which he had tied a few cock's feathers—as proud as if he were carrying a falcon. Then came the Grand Admiral himself, wearing a truly magnificent suit of gold-embroidered damask, a red velvet "bonnet," golden spurs, a golden necklace, gold everywhere, even in the wide leather-and-gold reins of his chestnut coloured, elegant mule. The procession, preceded and followed by all the youngsters of the town, flowed past a double row of gaping crowds until it reached the terrace of Don Rodrigo's mansion, where the host, with his wife, the prior and the doctor were awaiting them. It was the day of triumph for the discoverer. He was accompanied upstairs by Don Rodrigo and his wife, bidden to take a rest, then offered a sumptuous dinner as befitted a man who by now occupied one of the highest situations in the kingdom.

"Your Lordship," said Isabel with heartfelt sincerity, "must have felt most thankful when the caravels saw land."

"Thankful is the word, madam," answered the Magnificent Lord, the fire of pride shining hot through the veil of modesty which he endeavoured to throw over it. "My own merit is as nothing beside the Lord's mercy, which worked through it. After all, I could not be wrong, for all I did was based on prophecies and on Holy Writ."

The doctor ate with his eyes on his plate. He could not make him out. "But, sir," he ventured to ask, "what is it exactly you have found? A new world or a new way to the oldest part of the old?" The Magnificent Lord's white, freckled skin reddened visibly. Nothing roused his anger so much as a direct, concrete question of fact. "Why, dear sir," he explained in a hot, hurt voice, "is it not enough that I

bring men in my suite, such as you have never seen before, and gold by the sackful, and birds which are like nosegays with wings, and you must still ask me where I have been? New or old, it is all one world, and what I have struck is the end of the east or the beginning of the west—places no one had ever discovered yet. Moreover," he went on, shifting his fire from his emotions to his imagination, "I am just beginning. I will soon go back. Their Highnesses are in a hurry for me to sail again. And I hope to reveal to the world not only lands of untold wealth but . . . lands of salvation as well."

The doctor gave him up. Isabel sought a diversion. "Will Your Lordship tell us more about those birds?" He looked very much pleased. "They are truly magnificent creations of the Lord. There is no colour He has not bestowed on them; for I assure Your Mercy that any one of them is as pleasant to the eye as the king's garden in Seville in the month of May. And as for speaking——"

"Do they speak?" asked Isabel. "As for speaking," he went on, "there is nothing they cannot learn. I have one, a particularly fine bird, whom I have trained to greet me with a devout salutation every time to sees me."

"Oh, how delightful!" cried Isabel. "I wish I could hear him."

The Admiral of the Indies turned to Don Rodrigo. "If Your Mercy will give orders that my page Antonio bring the bird here——"

Antonio had his own views on birds, on the Admiral and on salutations. He was fifteen, mischievous and ambitious. The gold he had got in Haiti by bartering copper-bells and glass-beads had been confiscated by the Admiral on landing in Palos, on the ground that no one was allowed to barter but the Admiral himself. When old Suárez came to tell him that he was to bring the popinjay to their Lordships, he grinned. He had been improving the bird's vocabulary, as he fancied, not without success. But he thought it better not to appear in person. He sent the bird on the arm of a young Indian who spoke no Spanish and would therefore be spared the trouble of having to explain anything that might happen.

"Where is Antonio?" asked the Admiral. But no one answered him, for all eyes were on the popinjay and on the handsome Indian youth who had brought it in. "May the Lord bless your Lordship!" screeched the bird as soon as he saw the Admiral, and he repeated the greeting three times, amidst the gaping admiration of all present. Then, in a kind of aside, as though speaking to himself: "He is a bloody fool! He is a bloody fool! He is a bloody fool! . . . the Ad—mirarrrrl!"

The doctor choked badly; the Admiral turned as red as the

parrot's back and fiery tail ; the servants were in agony to hide their merriment ; and Don Rodrigo, his wife and the prior were non-plussed. Only the bird and the Indian kept throughout the scene the poise of innocence and the calm of ignorance.

2

The Magnificent Admiral went away in the afternoon, setting in the distance like another sun, with his glorious cloud of colourful treasures. Torremala fell back on its day-to-day life. Don Rodrigo had seized the opportunity as a pretext to reprieve Esquivel, whom he had kept in prison since the murder of Zaccharias. Esquivel's business had suffered considerably during his stay in prison. Don Rodrigo helped him to his feet again, and now, free from the rivalry of either Isaac or Zaccharias, Esquivel grafted on to his concern as armour-smith a money-lending business which soon restored him to prosperity if not to popularity.

Don Rodrigo's household was enriched, as a trace of the Magnificent Admiral's passage, with the gaily popinjay, which the Admiral was glad to leave behind, and the mischievous page, who disappeared at the moment of departure, to reappear again when the Admiral was far away, asking to be allowed to serve in the manor.

The household of the Manriques was somewhat mixed. Isabel's little son grew up mostly under the care of a Moorish slave whom the Grand Cardinal of Spain had sent to Don Rodrigo as a present after one of the rebellions which followed the fall of Granada. She was a young girl of a well-to-do family, about twelve years of age, precocious and responsible, with refined looks and manners and in particular a most scrupulous cleanliness which she imparted to the child. She had been formally christened and was styled Leonor, but had remained for all that a muslim, albeit not a very devout one.

The little Manrique grew up between his Jewish-Christian mother and his Moorish-Christian nurse, a setting more frequent than one might think in the childhood of many a devout Spaniard in those days. He had reverted to the fair-haired, blue-eyed type of his Visigothic ancestors, possibly with the help of his mother's Jewish genes, and Don Rodrigo was proud to observe that from his earliest days his body showed signs of vigour and promise of the high stature which had always singled out the Manriques for positions of danger and command. "We shall make a knight of him," he said with pride in his eyes. "We shall see," said Isabel.

She had other views. She had asked and obtained that the boy

should be christened Alonso as well as Manuel, for Alonso was the name of an illustrious Manrique who, after an exemplary life in the Church, had died in odour of sanctity. The first thing she had noticed about the child was his mental alertness. This had pleased her deeply. She had a keen mind herself, and was an eager devourer of books. The tendency of her little son to observe facts and to put two and two together made her happy, and Leonor knew that nothing pleased her mistress more than a fresh tale of how little Alonso had discovered some new fact of life.

The two women threw themselves into the task of educating him as soon as he was of age to learn. They taught him to read and found him so quick that neither was able to resist the pleasure of seeing him learn what each of them knew ; so that, before Don Rodrigo realised what was going on in the women's apartments, the boy knew how to read and speak Castilian, Hebrew and Arabic. His father found it out through his own mother. Doña Mencia had accepted her son's marriage with the utmost reluctance, and only on the stern admonitions of Father Guzmán. After the marriage she had retired with a few servants to the northern wing of the manor, where she lived a life of prayers, charities and memories. Without being a bigot or a martinet, she was apt to think that the new generation was not strict enough in its way of living. Little Alonso was taken to see his grandmother once or twice a week. One afternoon—he was in his tenth year—as he was in his grandmother's sitting-room, fiddling with a silver replica of Ferdinand III's sepulchre which occupied the place of honour in Doña Mencia's apartment, for it was a royal present to her husband, the boy, to her utter amazement, read and translated the epitaphs inscribed on it in Hebrew and in Arabic. Doña Mencia was flattered but shocked, the more so as she discovered that this boy, who read the epitaphs in the two infidel languages, could not read the one in Latin. "I wonder," she thought, "whether this little infidel can read Castilian!" And she asked him to read the fourth inscription engraved on the silver. To her relief, he did so with ease. Yet she remained deeply concerned and lost no time in conveying her state of mind to her son.

Don Rodrigo seized this opportunity to take over his son's education. "Enough petticoats!" he said to his wife, "Now it is my turn." She bowed to the inevitable, yet she obtained two concessions from her husband: the boy would be taught Latin by Father Guzmán and he would be allowed to keep up whatever he knew of Hebrew and Arabic. "Learning takes no room," said Don Rodrigo, and he gave his consent.

3

That day marked a radical change in the boy's life—a change which he felt not only in the revolution it brought about in his activities, but in the very feel and flavour of his life. Till then, he had lived protected. His senses had known only the sweet, the tender, the warm, the fragrant, the fresh, the harmonious, the delicately shaded, timed, balanced. While he would not have been able to put it into words, the experience of these, his earlier days, was alive in his inner consciousness, incarnated so to speak in the warm bosoms of his mother and of his youthful and beautiful nurse; and while he had never actually thought of them, these soft, sweet bosoms which had so often supported his sleepy head, were for him secret homes of bliss and enjoyment, each with a character of its own, which he felt definitely and distinguished by their aroma. Neither woman was particularly given to artificial perfumes so that these odours which he perceived in them were due to his own observation and instinctive comparisons: his mother for him had the scent of carnations; Leonor that of jessamine.

He began to turn his mind towards those days of childish bliss, which he had lived so unconsciously, when, under his father's guidance, he passed from the soft to the hard side of life. They had been unutterably sweet. He slept in a room next to Leonor's. Every morning she came to flood his room with light and his face with kisses, and he remembered the strong aroma of jessamine, which emanated from her as she leant over him and which pleased him—he did not know why—even more than her kisses. Then she bathed him. Ever since the Grand Vizier's daughter had entered the family, the Manriques had adopted a Moorish cleanliness which in later years was to suffice to cast on them suspicions of heresy. Leonor reinforced this tendency, which the pious, old-Christian members of the household looked upon with distrust. Blissfully unaware of it, she kept her ward in a really pagan state of bodily freshness and seemed to enjoy this part of her duties possibly more keenly than the rest. Then she took the boy to his mother, for Isabel did not trust any one but herself with the religious education of her child, and before breakfast he must say his prayers. His mother was already up and dressed, waiting for him. She kissed him with ever warm love, and he again enjoyed this kiss and even more the fresh aroma of carnations which emanated from his mother.

Isabel had a private chapel close to her bedroom. There she took little Alonso and knelt with him on the tiled floor—winter or summer

—before an altar on which stood a picture of the Mother and Child. Alonso loved this picture in which he had grown to see his mother and himself, transfigured into a beautiful and mysterious, eternal, inseparable entity. Flowers, mostly carnations, were always offering themselves, like living stars, before the image, and candles made of the household wax, burnt day and night before it. There, in the quiet silence, mother and child prayed to Mother and Child the simple prayers of the faithful. Alonso lived closest to his mother in that world, so small yet boundless, where he felt himself so little and yet all-embracing and as much at rest as the whole universe.

Steadied for the rest of the day, he came out from the chapel, feeling nothing but the body's call for food, and he devoured his breakfast of milk and bread and honey which Leonor had meanwhile prepared for him ; after which she sent him to the garden. The chief gardener was another Moor, a Mudéjar or "Left-behind," as the Moors were called who remained in the parts of the country conquered by the Christians. He loved the boy and taught him the names of the plants, their seasons, their ways, diseases, modes of reproduction, grafting, and he was struck by the ease with which the boy learnt it all. He used to let him help in the work, and of course, much of it could be good fun, such as watering with cans or opening and closing the sluices which allowed the water to run along one or other of the numerous rills with which he had skilfully chequered the garden. Now and then little Alonso would ride on the back of the patient donkey, who paced round and round the limited yet endless path of the noria, or he would imagine that he helped the gardener to push a wheelbarrow loaded with flower-pots. He loved these mornings spent in the garden, which was for him like an enchanted world of colours and scents into which he sank so deeply that it seemed to him at times as if he were living under a sky of brilliant and variegated colours in an air of soft and exhilarating aromas—a strange feeling of real unreality which now and then overpowered him.

Towards midmorning, Leonor would fetch him for a lesson. She made him wash and change, for he came in none the cleaner for his adventures in the garden, and then produced one or other of the *Atabic* books which she had been delighted to find in the house left from the days of the Moorish grandmother : poems, stories, travel-books. She made Alonso read them and then listen to her comments. Again a world of dreams, vivid colours and strong scents. Sultans, princesses, horses swift as lightning, genii for whom nothing was impossible, flowers and aromas, the keen delight of which pierced through the senses to the very core of the soul ; palaces, pillars, steps gently leading to clear waters lapping over the dazzling stone with their transparent wavelets ; flowing garments of silk and gold ; pearls

in strings, diamonds in constellations ; images which made life glow with mental light ; subtle thoughts which wove commonplace facts into lovely patterns, a pleasure to the mind ; stories of love and treachery which made the heart beat and gallop with the swift horse that bore the youthful saviour, curved sword in hand, an avenging fire in his hot black eyes, to kill the traitor and kiss the betrayed maid. . . . He read the beautiful pages covered with the delicate embroidery of the Arabic script, and now and then lifted his eyes from the book to find Leonor's deep, passionate eyes shining with repressed tears. He was too young to guess that those tears welled up less from the emotion of the story itself than from the memories of her home and life which the story and the language called forth in her exiled soul.

Yet the sight of her beautiful face, its beauty deepened by emotion, touched the boy and he would go to her and embrace her tenderly. Alonso was her only outlet, son, father, mother, husband, he was all to her ; the only human being she could love openly—and, she knew only too well, not for long. Whenever she embraced him, her heart's memories went back to her childhood in Granada. She was hardly twelve when her family had sided with the Morisco rebels and had lost their lovely house and garden. She had been sold as a slave. That home had been her paradise, in which her precocious being had enjoyed the first flutterings of love with a handsome, bright-eyed cousin, who had fled with the rebels. She saw again that heartrending scene when, under the deafening noise of the Christian trumpets which spelt ruin and slavery for them all, Hussein had rushed in for a last farewell. "Here," he had said, putting in the girl's hands a small silver and gold locket, "wear this round your neck for ever and ever and ever !" Leonor felt the locket warmly nested between her breasts. Would he ever come ? Would he remember her ? Hussein ! she thought longingly as she hugged the tender body of Alonso in her passionate arms. Though unaware of it, Alonso was then flooded by her love, and in such moments of intense emotion, his soul drank its fill at the very fountain of human affection and sorrow.

The mornings were Leonor's ; the afternoons belonged to his mother. After his siesta, he used to walk and play in the garden, while his mother sat sewing or embroidering ; and when the sun began to get low they went indoors, where his mother read or made him read, mostly religious and historical books. She knew the Law and the Prophets well in the Hebrew text, and had even read some of the less abstruse parts of the Talmud, for, in spite of her conversion, and wholly unaware of the danger which it implied, she had kept her mind open to the human and historical side of these old Jewish records. The boy, however, did not evince as much interest in the Hebrew books as in the language itself ; he was too full of the oriental splendour of his

Arabic readings to feel attracted by the legalistic casuistry of the Talmud, and too young to be struck by the constant lamentations of the prophets of Israel over the obduracy of their countrymen. His mother had not acquainted him with the Song of Songs ; her instinct told her that the boy was too sensitive to undergo the experience of such high-strung poetry. When Alonso grew restive under the austerity of the Hebrew text, she read him the lives of the saints, and in the high endeavour of these souls which had achieved the most exalted conquest that a human being can attempt, he found more adequate food for his imagination.

But his delight was the New Testament, and his hero was Jesus Christ, whose story he read in a lovely, illuminated Castilian manuscript. He followed the narrative of the Gospels with a passionate delight, waiting always through every incident with an anticipated pleasure, which, he had learnt to know, would never be disappointed, for the final triumph of Jesus in both word and deed. The easy infallibility of His answers, the perfect mastery of His behaviour were every time a joy to him, for he had a clear mind, with an unflinching instinct for the best. Gradually, he had grown to identify Jesus with the soft side of life, the side of his mother and of his nurse, for Jesus was ever in favour of love and forgiveness, the two sweet virtues. One day, however, they came to that passage in St. John where at the marriage in Cana, Jesus' mother came to him and said : " They have no wine." " Jesus saith unto her : woman, what have I to do with thee ? " Alonso could not get over it. How could his Jesus, the perfect incarnation of love and kindness, speak to his mother in that inconsiderate manner ? Despite his dismay, his tender years, his trust in his mother, some kind of instinct made him keep silent and swallow his doubt. He often remained thus dreaming and musing over the Gospels, so that she failed to notice what was then in his mind.

At other times they would read the old chronicles of Spain, in which Alonso found his lineage constantly shining with the brightest colours in the glorious tapestry of the Moorish wars. He followed these dramatic stories with a passionate interest and found himself fighting in spirit on this or that side of the battles that went on. It was not always easy to take sides on religious grounds, for more often than not the war cut across the faith line, as when a king of Morocco sent troops of " Infidels " to help a Christian king of Castille punish a rebellious son. When feeling hotly on the issue, seeing himself killing Moors on the battlefield, his heart would sometimes ache thinking of Leonor and of all that resplendent Arabian life which she had opened out for him. The puzzle of love and war rose in his heart. What was the true life ? He knew his mother's ideal of love was right.

He knew the bad man must be punished. And he knew he would love a fight. His soul rose to a heroic pitch when his mother sang deeds of old transfigured into poetry by the unknown authors of the popular ballads.

Isabel was delighted to find her little son most responsive to music. She played the *vihuela* well, and was fond of accompanying the old Spanish and Spanish-Jewish songs which she sang with a sweet soprano voice. She taught him to play, but though the boy made good progress, he preferred to listen to her when she sang the tragedy of the seven infants of Lara or the deeds of the Count of Castille or the exploits of the Cid ; but even more when, leaving epics aside, she sang lyrical poetry, such as the hymns composed in honour of St. Mary by King Alfonso the Wise, or a lovely, melancholy, haunting song of the Spanish Jews, the refrain of which lingered in his memory :

. Beware of love, for it is a wide, wide sea ! . . .

Why ? He could not tell. He did not know love and had never seen the sea. But that refrain moved him to the depths of his being. It seemed to open an unlimited world within him and to set his soul moving with an emotion as warm as his mother's embraces, as tense as Leonor's face when her eyes were full of unshed tears, and as vast, as unimagined as that sea which went on and on for ever, and beyond which, unknown to him, an exotic flower was just budding which it was to be his fate to pluck from its native soil.

4

There was a bad boy in his world. His name was Esquivel. He was the son of a bad man his father knew well. He was sluggish though strong, cross-eyed and ill-willed. Beyond the orchard, in a wide, open space, conveniently furnished with old derelict carts, one or two sheds and a few yards of neglected hedge, Alonso and other youngsters used to play at "Thieves and Constables." Esquivel always wanted to lead the thieves. Alonso insisted that it was only fair to be thieves or constables by turns, since there was more fun in being a thief than a constable. This often started the game in a bad mood. Esquivel, besides, suffered from envy. His father was not precisely loved in Torremala, Since the town had recovered from its anti-Jewish riots, there had been a tendency to shake off the shame and the blame on Esquivel, who had organised them, and the armour-smith had now added usury to the other grounds of his unpopularity.

In his house, despite Don Rodrigo's generous way with him, the feeling towards the castle was always hostile ; moreover, young Vicente nursed a grievance of his own against Alonso ; he was ugly and Alonso was handsome.

One day when Vicente was acting as head of the thieves and Alonso as chief of the constables, a small boy, who happened for the time being to be on the side of the law, being slow on his legs, had the bright idea of climbing a tree which made an excellent observation post. That day Esquivel had discovered what he thought an ideal hiding-place, a loft between the roof and the ceiling of an old uninhabited farm building. To his dismay he was found by Alonso much sooner than usual. He was nonplussed. He knew no one had seen him climb there and he knew the site could only be seen from above, through a wide gap in the roof. He was vexed and resentful. He wanted to know how he had been found. Laughing good-humouredly, Alonso just pointed at little Juanillo on top of the tree, hiding in the foliage. Vicente Esquivel was furious, rushed to the tree in a wild rage and shook it so hard that Juanillo lost his balance and fell. The poor boy shrieked with pain, but Esquivel was not yet satisfied and kicked his victim viciously. Alonso's blood was up. He ran to the spot, but Vicente sought safety in flight. A race followed, easily won by Alonso who knocked Esquivel down and slapped him with fury, then walked away as if relieved of a heavy load.

The other boys had taken Juanillo indoors and Leonor was attending to him. "Where is mother?" asked Alonso. He felt very uneasy. He found himself a most awkward person to live with—and who else was he to live with? He was uneasy because he had thoroughly enjoyed knocking young Esquivel down and slapping him, and he felt that this enjoyment could not be explained merely as the outcome of his love for Esquivel's victim, still less as love of justice.

All was not soft in the world. There was something hard somewhere, even in his inner self. How did the two combine and which of the two was right? And could they live together? And could they do without each other? These questions did not rise separately in his mind, but all mixed up in a kind of haze or fog of uneasiness and doubt which filled his soul and darkened it.

5

When young Vicente arrived home that evening, he did his best to keep silent over the incident ; but his sister Marta noticed something at once. Brother and sister kept-up a cat-and-dog atmosphere

in the home. She was two years his senior but hardly taller, thin, black-haired, black-eyed, swarthy, ardent and bilious, with a quick wit and a poisonous tongue ; while he was inclined to grow fat, not fond of exertion, slow both in his mental and in his physical movements. "Hollo," she cried out as she saw him sneaking in in the dusky light, "Who has been kissing you ? He must love you !" The boy was furious and answered nothing, but as their mother was sitting there on the threshold, he had to tell his story, of course in his own way. "You hit back, anyhow !" she asked spitefully, for she hated the Manriques. "I . . . of course I did !" asserted the boy with more voice than conviction. "You liar !" cried his sister. There was a heat in her voice which startled her mother. "Of course," retorted Vicente, "your darling Alonso cannot be touched." She blushed crimson. She thought of nothing else the whole day but the handsome features and the flowing fair curls of the young Manrique, the dream of her girlish days. Vicente knew how she would run out of her way for miles just to catch a glimpse of Alonso, and was the only one in the house to notice how flustered she became when the Esquivels crossed the Manriques on their way to church. But what Vicente did not know, for it was her secret, was the thrill and the shiver of delight which ran down her back when, at night, in her bed, she thought of him in the dark and by sheer concentration managed to see him actually with her eyes, as soon as she shut them. She prized those moments more than anything else life had to give her, and did not care whether her nasty brother jeered at her or not.

Their father turned up from the inner part of the house, through a door which led to the shop. Brother and sister were still arguing and barking at each other. "Enough ! What is the matter ?" asked Esquivel. Marta snarled : "He got a slap in the face and wants to unload it on me !" "Who struck you ?" The boy gave no answer. Marta volunteered one with a satisfaction she was unable to hide. "Ah, the dirty Jew !" grumbled Esquivel. His wife looked at him with dismay, and his son with eyes of wonder, as if a new world had just been opened before him. As for Marta, choking with emotion and repressed tears, she hurried into the house.

6

Under his father's guidance Alonso passed from a life in a minor to a life in a major key. Alonso knew little of his father, just enough to realise that he belonged to a different world from that of his mother, a world which he felt subconsciously as "hard." Now and then a

visit to see how he was getting on, a pull at his ear, meant to be friendly, yet not precisely pleasant, a word in jest or in reproof, to hide his paternal love with flippancy or with severity ; never any of the sweet, soft attractive forms of feminine life—that was all his experience of his father. Seldom, very seldom was he allowed to enter his father's study, and he had kept such an unpleasant memory of one of these rare occasions that he had no wish to return. It so happened that as he was there one day, fingering the few objects worth the attention of a boy of eight which the room contained, his father was called away by the steward. The boy had already exhausted the possibilities for amusement afforded by the floor, the tables, the chairs and the chests ; he began to look out for new worlds to explore. He wondered what could be hidden on top of the armoury. There was something to be seen over the edge of it, the point of a stick perhaps, just enough to whet his curiosity. He climbed on to a chair and saw two dust-covered canes. The tops were golden. One was marked with letters . . . the other one also. . . . He could not read them, but they were letters. Of that he was sure. He made up his mind to read these golden inscriptions. He tried to bring the canes down. How heavy they were ! But was he to give it up ? Never. He gradually rolled them to his side and slid them carefully down on to the chair, then took them over to his father's desk, by the window. He read the letters. R.M., A.M. The first, no doubt, was meant for his father and the second for him, What a lovely discovery ! He would have a wonderful stick when he grew up ! But meanwhile, was he to put them back where they were or to ask his father ? He decided to ask his father. Then he changed his mind. He felt that his father meant the sticks to be hidden. He must therefore hide them again. At this point Don Rodrigo came back. To the boy's astonishment he became purple with a fury out of proportion to his son's fault. The repressed secret (all that Jewish side of his life which he tried hard to forget) was pestering him so that the pressure he had put on it till then now exploded in a fury against his little son. He said nothing, but with bloodshot eyes which terrified little Alonso he went towards the boy, tore down his garments and seizing one of the canes—it happened to be the one marked A.M.—raised it to punish the boy with it. The cane vibrated through the air, violently shaken by his furious hand, and before it had touched the boy's naked body, split open and flooded his buttocks with a river of golden coins. Don Rodrigo, dumbfounded, his arm petrified in mid-air by surprise, let the river of gold flow on his boy's body and between his legs on to the floor, like a cataract of tinkling and shining metal. " Well ! " he said, and he let go the boy who, intrigued and ashamed, adjusted his clothes, weeping though he did not know exactly why.

"Alonso!"

"Yes, sir," answered the boy, casting down his eyes.

"Come here." Don Rodrigo had sat down with a pool of gold at his feet and was caressing the boy's hair. "You must never again make me angry. And you must never speak of this gold to any one. Never. You hear?"

"Yes, sir," answered the boy; then, timidly: "Shall I . . . pick it up?"

"No. Leave me now." Don Rodrigo locked the door behind Alonso and patiently put together his treasure. He then lifted the other cane, shook it carefully close to his ear, weighed it in his hand and hid it away, this time under lock and key.

7

This scene made Don Rodrigo the more determined to take his boy over from the women. He moved him from the quarters which he occupied close to Leonor's, to a different part of the house, giving him as his page and tutor Antonio, the youth who had remained in Torremala as a result of his success in teaching Spanish to popinjays. Antonio was fifteen years the boy's senior. He was now a young man, handsome, gay, brave, bright, if not altogether intelligent, and well educated enough. Don Rodrigo had grown to appreciate him as a kind of private secretary and chief of staff to his small military feudal establishment, for Antonio could write fairly well, knew the four rules of arithmetic and was an excellent horseman and a good soldier with spear and sword, though not very well versed in firearms.

Alonso was awakened at dawn and, after a frugal breakfast, began the day with his riding lessons. By the time he was wont to sit down to his comfortable breakfast with Leonor, he was now shaken to the bones with trotting and galloping. He came home thinking of nothing but sleep. He was allowed to sleep during the first months of his training, till he became accustomed to his harder days, but his frame was sound and robust and he soon stood the strain with a vigour which pleased him as much as it gratified his father and teacher.

The boy enjoyed the new scope opened to his activity. Space had grown wonderfully. The women's world was sweet, soft and warm, but somewhat confined. Now the whole valley had become his, and he galloped up and down the meandering course of the river amidst Moorish olive groves and Christian cornfields with the zest of a discoverer. Hard it certainly was, for he came home aching all over

with the exertion ; but he never complained about it, a fact on which his father and his tutor exchanged glances of pride and satisfaction. " If he ever falls, he will stand it like a man ! " said Antonio.

Don Rodrigo was beginning to enjoy the company of his son almost as much as if the boy were a horse, a hound, or a falcon. He would ride out with him now and then and make him gallop by his side to test his horsemanship and nerve. One afternoon, after a long ride, father and son had tied up their horses to a chestnut tree in the leafy, shady avenue which led to the manor from the Seville road, and were resting by the path-side, when a youngster who might be eighteen years of age came towards them and asked them if they could show him the way to the house of Don Rodrigo Manrique.

" I believe we could," said Don Rodrigo, " but who are you, and where are you going, young man ? "

There was a tone of authority in the voice. The young stranger answered at once : " I will tell you all, but . . . could you give me something to eat ? "

He was handsome, and revealed good birth and breeding in his countenance and features, though he was clad in poor clothes, very much the worse for wear. His shoes were nearly worn through and his toes showed through the holes of the leather. He wore no hose.

Don Rodrigo glanced at his boy and Alonso brought out from the saddle-bag of his father's horse a most appetising ham-pie which the stranger devoured with eagerness. " Sir," he said as he ate, " my father is a friend of Don Rodrigo Manrique. They fought together in Monroy's war over the Order of St. James." Don Rodrigo frowned at this, for he disliked that youthful episode of his life, when he had taken part in a rebellious uprising against the queen. " Who is your father ? " he asked. " An hidalgo of Medellín," said the youngster cautiously. Don Rodrigo was less cautious. " That can only be Martín Cortés, the husband of my cousin, Doña Catalina Altamirano." And the boy : " That is it, sir. And I am their son. My name is Hernán." Don Rodrigo thought it his duty to reveal his identity. " I am happy to greet you, Sir Hernán Cortés. I am your father's friend." Then, with a glance at his attire : " I wish I could greet you in better circumstances."

" Forgive me, sir. It is no fault of my father, but all my own. He sent me to Salamanca, to study at the university there, but I was bent on arms, finding letters too soft for me, and I resolved to leave for Italy and to enlist under the banners of the Great Captain Gonzalo de Córdoba. I was waylaid and have been spending nearly two years in a vagabond sort of way, mostly in Seville, Cádiz, Sanlúcar and Palos."

" And, may I ask, what have you been doing ? "

"Just keeping my eyes open, sir, for I assure Your Mercy that the sight is worth the time. Those ships coming from the New World are enough to fascinate any man. Your Mercy should see the gold chains and necklaces which even the sailors bring round their necks ! I have made up my mind to go to the New World. The Old World is already conquered all over. King Ferdinand has expelled the Moors. There are no more conquests for a young man to build a noble house upon. So, on to the New World."

Don Rodrigo, smiled, pleased at the youngster's ambition. "And why were you travelling towards my house ?" he asked. "I was in need, sir," answered Hernán Cortés frankly, "I had not eaten for two days and I am penniless. I remembered hearing my father speak of Your Mercy and I resolved to come to you, to tell you all and to ask you to make it easier for me to return to Medellín, for I want to ask my father's blessing before leaving for the Indies."

"Let us go home," said Don Rodrigo. "We shall provide you with all you need to travel in a way worthy of your rank."

Alonso had listened to the conversation eagerly. The youngster looked at him for a while, then asked Don Rodrigo : "Is this Your Mercy's son ? May God preserve him for you. If I ever succeed in what I have in mind to do, I shall be glad to ask him to come and serve God by my side."

"And what is it that you have in mind to do ?" asked Don Rodrigo. The eyes of the youngster shone with a new fire and he answered : "The New World is so big that it is bound to contain many heathen kingdoms and empires. With the Lord's help, I might conquer one for His Highness."

Alonso glanced at the ambitious youngster with eyes full of admiration, while in his memory he heard again the haunting line of his mother's song :

Beware of love for it is a wide, wide sea . . . !

One evening, as they were returning home after a brisk ride, Antonio and Alonso were crossing a fine avenue of chestnuts in a small wood close to the castle grounds, when the boy, who was riding a small Moorish pony, suddenly fell to the ground, while the pony performed the weirdest antics, in order, it seemed, to keep its balance, Antonio, a few yards behind, pulled up and rushed to Alonso's help. But as he stooped, his eyes caught some odd movement behind a tree.

Curiosity was stronger than charity. He stared at the tree, while the boy lay motionless at his feet, and suddenly saw a mysterious stranger running away as fast as he could. He could not see who he was, save that he certainly was a boy of about Alonso's age.

Alonso had fainted but was coming to. Antonio let him rest for a while on the soft underwood, and went to attend to the pony, when suddenly he himself tripped over an obstacle and fell on his face. He could have sworn that someone had laughed in the distance. "By God!" he growled, "if ever I catch the whoreson!" He then discovered the cause of the trouble, a length of copper wire which had been tied across the path from tree to tree. He undid it, rolled it up and put it in his pocket. "Well, my boy," he said cheerfully, "how about going home?" Alonso made a swift motion to rise, but fell back on the ground, held down by the pain. "No hurry, no hurry. You must be patient. Let me put you on my horse." He lifted the boy, set him on his horse, and slowly brought him home.

As soon as he had left him in the hands of his mother and nurse, Antonio went straight to Esquivel's shop. He had an idea. Esquivel was surprised to see him there. Antonio blew in as if in a great hurry and asked, "Do you keep wire like this?" Esquivel looked at the wire, took it to the candle-light and said, "Keep? I should say I do. It comes from my shop." "I thought it did. Good. Have you got a son? How old is he?"

"But . . . but . . ." stammered Esquivel, "what has my son got to do—?" He was getting nervous. To his dismay, the culprit rushed in, unaware of the presence of a stranger. "Hallo!" he said airily. Antonio recognised him at once. "Ah! Young scoundrel!" He had got hold of the boy's ear and was pulling at it savagely. "Ah, young scoundrel! Come with me, come with me, I say!" Before Esquivel could muster enough courage to stand up to the castle, the boy was on Antonio's horse, held firmly down by Antonio who rode away in grim silence with his prey.

9

When they arrived at the castle it was nearly dark. Not a word had passed between them. Antonio was enjoying his vengeance, which he saw as justice. Vicente was shaking with fear. Antonio alighted first, then dragged Vicente down with a forcible pull at the boy's arm. "Come on, young scamp," he said, "I will teach you to play with copper wires," and he led the boy towards a stone staircase which sank below ground at the dark corner of the entrance hall.

Presently Vicente found himself in a cold, damp, long corridor, walking blindly in the dark, firmly held by Antonio's iron hand which fastened a rigid ring round his arm. Gradually a faint light filtering in from a distant corridor allowed him to see where he was ; and as he was beginning to find his bearings, Antonio pushed him sideways and with a swift movement shut a door and bolted it.

Vicente was now in complete blackness. No light at all, however faint. He shut his eyes and opened them again several times : it made no difference whatever. His feet felt the slimy floor covered with damp straw. He dared not move for fear of falling. He reached out for a wall, and his hand touched a damp, cold stone. Little by little he explored the four walls of his prison with trembling hands and hesitating feet. The centre he dared not lest there was a well or a hole in it. His knees knocked up against a hard obstacle which he recognised as a wooden bench. Suddenly he pricked up his ears. The straw was moving, though he was motionless. His heart sank in his body. " Who is there ? " he thought and dared not ask, lest the stranger, the ghost, the monster, found him out and devoured him. He stuck to the wall, paralysed with fear, shaking so much all over that it seemed to him the stone wall behind him and the floor underfoot and all the straw on it were trembling, shaking, quaking with a noise which might be that of the stones of the wall knocking against each other in their trepidation, but which was in fact the chattering of his teeth. Teeth. T-t-t-teeth. The image of teeth was pressing itself into his imagination, sharp, white, and as if lit up by this dazzling white of the chattering, rattling teeth, the huge teeth of a dragon shone in the dark, at the far end of the dungeon—huge, sharp, white eye-teeth, above which two terrifying, bulging eyeballs goggled murderously at him. The beast began to move towards him out of some obscure corner of his dreams and memories and suddenly vanished. Black again. A black even more terrible than the terrible dragon. The boy moved backwards and farther backwards, away from the monster, pressing himself into the stone as if trying to disappear into or through it. The stranger-ghost-monster remained stuck in the mass of the black enigmatic void, but now and then rustled ever so slightly over the straw. This agony lasted a lifetime, possibly as much as a minute, till with unspeakable horror, Vicente felt the monster-ghost-stranger trying to seize him passing between his legs and the wall, close to his feet, just behind his ankles. He pressed hard against the wall, but the warm, elastic, live limb of the monster pressed on, and feeling the boy's opposition, drove some sharp pointed claw into his leg. Vicente shrieked and fell unconscious on the muddy ground.

His shriek frightened the rat which ran into its hole at full speed ; but it also pierced through the very soul of Isabel, who was then in

her private chapel, just above the dungeon, praying in thankfulness for the safe escape of her son. Though deadened by the beams and planks of her floor, Vicente's cry had shaken her violently from her quiet contemplation and she began to tremble just as the boy had been trembling when he cried and fell. She doubted at first whether she had actually heard anything, thinking it might possibly be a hallucination ; but while she doubted, Vicente had gradually come to and so lost the blissful rest from his agony which he had briefly enjoyed. Terror came back with consciousness and he began to shriek again. Isabel ran out of the chapel. "Quick, Leonor. Find out what is happening in the dungeon." She would not wait. Both ran downstairs, followed by old Suárez, who saw them run down the slippery steps without even a light. He overtook them with an oil-lamp in his faithful hand. They ran towards the heartrending shrieks. Suárez unbolted the door and the soft light of the oil-lamp revealed the pitiful sight of a boy of twelve whose tense terror was by now melting into tears.

"For the Lord's sake," cried out Isabel, "who has locked up this boy in here?" Suárez explained. When Vicente heard himself accused of his heinous crime, the pitch of his moaning rose by a half-tone. Suárez had made him stand up, pulling him up by an ear, and the boy was sobbing and ashamed before his victim's mother. Isabel said nothing to him. She looked sad and puzzled. "Why," she thought, "he is so ugly and mine is so handsome ! That is why, I am sure." Then, aloud to Leonor, "Have him washed and fed and send him back to his mother."

The boy could not believe his ears and his mean little mind began to cast about for utilitarian reasons to explain this action, inexplicable to him. As they were going back upstairs, they heard Antonio's voice talking roughly and loudly : "Get away, you slut ! Your whoreson of a son is spending a night with the rats." Isabel blushed crimson in the dark. She took the boy by the hand : "Here," she said to Susana Esquivel, "take your boy back and watch him better." And she disappeared into the house, while Susana looked at her with eyes of surprise and resentment.

10

Isabel and Leonor, frightened at first on seeing Alonso arrive limp on the back of Antonio's horse, were soon relieved to find that there was nothing serious to be feared from the accident. It was the first time that they had taken charge of the boy since he had passed over to the mien's apartments, and they were horrified to find how dirty

he was. "He stinks," Leonor cried out with grief. "He cannot have had a bath since he left us! And look at his hair!" Whereupon she thought, most heretically, "Evidently Antonio must be an Old-Christian!" Isabel seized this opportunity to wrench a few concessions from the "hard world" party. The boy would be given one bath a week as a minimum and be allowed to wash himself clean every time he came home from riding; she also asked that he should begin his Latin studies under Father Guzmán.

Unaware of this tug-of-war over his education, Alonso, rapidly restored to health, began to enjoy his riding and fencing again. He was quick and agile and was soon able to meet Antonio sword in hand. He fenced so well that he became very fond of it, and both Don Rodrigo and Antonio observed that his proficiency was due not merely to his physical ability and mental alertness, but also to his courage and to a certain spirit of aggressiveness which the sword brought out in him, though no signs of it were to be noticed otherwise in his life. He was, in fact, thriving in the hard world as he had thriven in the soft; yet, with an added zest which he would not have been able to explain, due to the fact that in the soft world he had been mostly an object of affection, while in the hard world he was a subject of activity. What he enjoyed on horseback was not so much the sensuous pleasure of a quicker and intenser impact of nature's air and space on his body, as the feeling of dominion over the horse; what he enjoyed in fencing was the art of imposing his will on his adversary.

This mood—for it was a mood rather than a state of mind, still less a thought—dawned upon him when his mother told him how young Esquivel, out of revenge, had deliberately laid a wire trap so that his horse should trip and he fall. "Antonio found it out and the young scamp was locked up in the cellar-jail." "For how long?" asked Alonso. "Not for longer than I knew about it," answered his mother. "I had him released at once. Poor boy! He had spent a terrible time with the rats!"

Alonso felt pity; but he also felt the contempt within his pity, and the enjoyment within his contempt. "Why did you free him?" he asked his mother. "Why, wouldn't you have done the same?" He turned it over in his mind for a while, then said, "Yes, of course, poor devil!" She accepted this as a humble valley version of the Sermon of the Mount, and explained: "Then, you see, it is not wise to make him more revengeful still!" He smiled, "But, mother, that is fear, not love." And she, "You need both . . . when you are a woman."

Thus he grew between the two worlds, the hard and the soft, his father's and his mother's, building up his fine body in the one, and his fine sensibility in the other, and finding a constant stimulus to his keen

brain in the contrast between the two. One day, when he was reading with his mother, he came upon the scene on the Mount of Olives, as told by St. Matthew, when Jesus said to St. Peter : " Put up again thy sword into his place : for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword." He stopped dead. " Why don't you read on ? " asked his mother. " Do you think," he asked, " that Jesus Christ would have liked fencing ? " This was somewhat unexpected. She thought it over. " Jesus," she explained, " was very angry with the merchants who had defiled the temple and he scourged them. So, provided your weapon is used with a pure heart——" " But I don't mean that," broke in the boy. " I don't mean whether Jesus would like me to fence. I mean, would he have liked fencing himself ? " Isabel laughed outright : " What a question ! " She feared to understand and kept the awkward idea off her mind. Alonso meanwhile, sitting on a small stool at his mother's feet, was thinking hard himself, with the book open on her knees. The fact was that he did not understand himself. He felt how lovely, and in a sense, how right was his mother's world. The hero of that world was Jesus Christ—that he felt also quite clearly. But there was the other world, his father's. It was steely, sharp and, he guessed, terrible. The art of this other world so different from that of Jesus Christ was fencing. Now, he, Alonso, loved fencing. How could he at the same time love Jesus Christ ? His imagination went back to that youth, Hernán Cortés, who was ready to conquer an empire for Christendom. Alonso felt absolutely certain that Hernán Cortés loved fencing. It was through fencing that he meant to conquer an empire for Jesus Christ. But did Jesus Christ love fencing ? That was the thought which was then troubling his mind.

" What are you thinking about ? " asked his mother, combing his silky, golden hair with her light fingers. He felt unable to explain it clearly. He was not raising the issue whether war was right or wrong for a Christian ; he was merely feeling that if he ever came to crossing swords, real swords which drew blood, whether he did so for a good cause or for a bad, he would enjoy the sport. " Is courage wrong ? " he asked his mother, and yet he knew this question was not what he really meant. " Courage ? No. It is the best virtue a man can have." And he : " Even if the man is a thief ? " Isabel felt uneasy and out of her depth : " A courageous thief is bad because he is a thief, not because he is courageous." He mused over the answer : " But a courageous thief does more harm than a cowardly one who runs away ! " His mother thought it was time Father Guzmán took a hand in his education, and he thought that there were more things in life than were dreamt of in his mother's soft world.

II

One lovely afternoon, early in the spring of 1504, young Hernán Cortés alighted proudly from a handsome horse at the main door of the Manriques. He was simply but well dressed. Behind him a servant rode on a mule well loaded with baggage and eatables which Hernán's mother had stocked for her son's long crossing. Hernán was on his way to Sanlúcar, to sail for the Indies. Don Rodrigo received him with open arms. The young man brought a letter from his father, thanking Don Rodrigo for the hospitality given his son and explaining how he had bowed before young Hernán's desire "to serve God and the Queen in the New World." At table Hernán Cortés happened to say that he was looking for a young boy to sail with him as page, "for his food." Isabel, who had listened in silence to the men's conversation, spoke then for the first time: "I may perhaps help Your Mercy in this matter." Don Rodrigo looked up, somewhat surprised, but kept silent. Isabel had improvised a plan while listening to Cortés. She was most anxious to get rid of young Vicente Esquivel in whom she saw a constant threat to her son's safety. "Why not the Indies?" she thought. That very afternoon she sent for Susana Esquivel, the boy's mother.

Cortés had left the castle on foot, to see what Torremala was like. It was market day and, following the crowd, he found himself in the big square of the old Jewry, whither the market had been transferred after the expulsion of the Jews. It was a square in fact as well as in name, framed by arched galleries which enabled the more prosperous merchants to keep their trade brisk and alive during the hot hours even in summer; but on market days business covered all the central area as well, under the protection of awnings. Cortés came and went between the stalls, where thick, black cloth from Toledo, Segovia and Seville was sold next to the soft, gay-coloured silk from Granada, or travelling rugs and bed-covers of dark wool gaudily ornamented with bright coloured patterns; here a Cordoban Moor sold leather jerkins and shoes; there a Castilian from Talavera had spread several dozen yellow-and-blue pieces of Talavera crockery in regular rows on the sun-bathed ground. There was a quarter where metal utensils were sold, easy to detect, for it shone in the sun which brought out the copper of the cauldrons and the cold gleams of the knives. Eatables of all kinds, particularly meats and cheeses, were plentiful, and there was a lively corner, which attracted the attention of the young adventurer, for it was reserved for horses, mules and asses. Hawkers paced the market with trays of wares hanging from the neck by a leather strap,

and one carried a barrel of cold water on his back, which he served to thirsty purchasers, pouring it skilfully into a tin-goblet with an uncanny movement of his shoulder and arm, tipping the barrel over fully two feet above the goblet. Cortés was much amused by this performance and even more by the circle of admiring urchins and youngsters who surrounded the artist. "There is Calero!" shouted one of them, a small, swarthy fellow, and they all ran after him. "That seems to be their leader," thought Cortés, and he went on, pausing here and there to watch, to learn, to smile at what he saw.

Presently the procession of youngsters came back towards the centre of the market, advancing along an alley of awning-covered booths towards the fountain (usually dry) in the middle of the square. They followed Calero, singing the song which they had invented to abuse him :

Ramón Calero,
Son of a hag,
Your mouth is twisted.
Your teeth are black.

The fool walked in front of them, apparently enjoying the fun as much as everybody else, leaving behind him a trail of grins and smiles. Cortés gave him a silver coin. Calero refused it. The boys shouted with joy at the scene. It was the standing joke in Torremala : Calero always refused silver. "Coppers ! Coppers only !" said he, and Cortés, with a puzzled smile, gave him a copper which the fool pocketed straightaway. Cortés let them continue their triumphant march through the market. Calero had a long twig in his hand with which he struck now a woman's head, now a copper cauldron, but, as Cortés was quick to observe, never so as to cause any serious harm. The boy who had seemed to him to lead the troop was now pinning on Calero's coat a long string which he had attached to one of the wooden trestles of a crockery stand in the alley. All the boys stood waiting, while singing their song of abuse, to induce Calero to march on, till the string pulled him hard. The fool, believing it was the boys who were pulling him back, pulled harder than ever, till the whole stand came down with a strepitous noise of broken crockery and violent swearing on the part of the potter and the clatter and gallop of the boys. Cortés realised that Calero was in danger when he saw the look in the merchant's face. He stepped forward between the angry man and the fool. "Stay," he said, "None of your business," retorted the potter. "Stay, I say !" Cortés stamped on the ground. "He is not responsible and you must wait for the King's justice." "This is no king's land, young man," remarked the potter, somewhat calmer, and

he drew in, cautious, on seeing young Esquivel, the leader and real culprit, brought upon the scene by a constable. The boy had not forgotten the rat in the castle-dungeon and was sorry indeed, though for strictly selfish reasons, about the whole incident. His accomplices surrounded the group. The potter was preparing his accusation in his mind, and casting a reckoning glance at the breakage, so as to be ready if and when a claim for compensation arose. Cortés was turning over in his mind the generous thought of buying the potter out with a gold coin of the few his father had been able to spare for his voyage. And then, the unexpected happened.

Antonio turned up. "Hallo, young man!" he cried out humourously, as he recognised young Esquivel, "in trouble again?" Then, turning to Cortés, "Sir, I have orders to take this boy to the castle. He is wanted there." "How about my breakage?" complained the potter. "We will see to that," said Antonio with authority. And he left for the castle, followed by the constable who held the boy firmly as if he were a desperate bandit, and by the crowd of the other boys, amongst whom Calero limped along, muttering to himself things mysterious and recondite.

Susana Esquivel had obeyed the summons of the lady of the manor with a heavy heart. What could have happened? She feared some adventure on the part of her temperamental daughter, whose infatuation for the manor boy gave her many sleepless nights. "Or possibly some other prank of Vicente!" she thought, remembering the copper-wire story and the rat in the dungeon.

To her deep surprise she found a most affable, almost affectionate Isabel, who received her with a smile and asked about her family. Without undue beating about the bush, Isabel went straight to the subject. She painted the opportunity in glowing colours and urged Susana to make up her mind quickly for the sake of her son. "The young hidalgo," she added, "is due to leave to-morrow and to sail in a week. He might choose somebody else." "But my boy is only twelve!" argued Susana. "That is exactly what the young hidalgo wants." Susana began to consider the matter with a favourable eye. There was safety in it, for the boy was sure to come to grief some day against the power of the castle he hated, and there was money also, for everybody said that the New World was a marvellous place where gold could be gathered from the rivers.

Isabel had quietly despatched Antonio to bring both father and son to the castle. The first to arrive was the father. He was never at ease in the castle, least of all in the presence of Isabel. When he entered the room, she left him with his wife after as cordial a greeting as she could make. "Esquivel, your wife will explain our plan. Talk it over with her and I will return presently."

"How much does he pay?" was his first question to his wife. "Just the food," answered Susana. And she added, "But the boy may make his fortune there." He grinned, "Ha! wants to get rid of our boy. She's afraid for her darling!"

There was a hubbub in the corridor. Antonio, believing Isabel was in the room, opened the door and, stepping aside to let Cortés in, followed with young Vicente Esquivel. "Here is the hero of the day!" he explained, before noticing Isabel's absence. "What have you been doing?" said Susana in a white fury, seeing that she had been let down by her unruly boy. "Is this your boy?" asked Cortés, and he briefly told Vicente's parents the story of the potter's stand, then, unexpectedly, "I will take the boy with me as a page. I like a boy with leadership and initiative." The parents hesitated. "If you let me have him, I will buy the potter out of this business." "May the Lord pay you back with his blessings," said Susana, crossing herself.

Next day, as Hernán Cortés was leaving Torremala, followed by his servant, and by his new page Vicente Esquivel, Calero was on the road to bid him farewell. Cortés alighted and walked along the road by the side of the wise fool. "I want you to keep this money in memory of my passage through Torremala," said Cortés, offering him a gold coin. "No, sir. Coppers, coppers only," insisted Calero. Cortés offered him silver. "Coppers, coppers only," insisted the wise fool. Cortés gave him a few coppers which he accepted. "And now," said Cortés, "tell me why you will never accept gold or silver."

"That is a secret," said Calero, "which I cannot reveal." He glanced at Cortés with eyes more purposeful, more steady than Cortés had ever seen in him, and added: "Look, young man, you are a generous hidalgo and can keep a secret. Coppers is good business, but only because people know that I refuse silver and gold. If I ever accepted a silver coin, the fun would be over and I would get no more coppers."

Cortés stood in the middle of the road for a long while, looking at him as he limped back to the town, a comic figure of tragedy, a foolish figure of wisdom.

Alonso soon discovered that the mind closest to his own was that of Father Guzmán. The prior of the monastery had personally taken in hand his Latin education, not only out of friendship for the youth's mother, his convert, but because he felt a strong attachment for Alonso

himself, in whom he guessed a keen mind and a straight heart. In his turn Alonso felt drawn to the monk both by affection and by curiosity. He might be any age between fifty and seventy. In his usual mood he was fifty : bright eyes, shining deep in the shaded caves of his eye-sockets, sharp, intelligent nose, lofty brow and a thin, good-humoured smile ; but sometimes, there came upon him a wave of ashy sadness which made him look much older. His bony frame and rough, woollen frock impressed Alonso as belonging to the hard world which for him was embodied in his father ; but the monk's patience, his kindness to man and beast, his generosity and his self-denial, suggested to the boy the soft world of his mother and his nurse. At first he could not make him out. Gradually it began to dawn upon him that there might be a third world, neither soft nor hard, or possibly both hard and soft, and this mystery which he guessed in Father Guzmán was the chief magnet which led him so eagerly to the monastery every morning.

He rode out at dawn, usually alone, and leaving the house still wrapped in the greyish haze of the dying night, he turned his horse towards the east through a quiet path sunk in a wood of chestnut trees which meandered down towards a brook and, climbing up a steep hill on the other side, soon allowed him to enjoy the sight of the austere stone-fabric, behind and above which the rising sun lit up a glorious aureole. Alonso arrived in time for Father Guzmán's mass, which he served. The Latin of the mass was the first he had been taught. The prior was as fond of the poets of Rome as any man, but he preferred to train boys on Church-Latin, leaving profane pleasures for a more mature age.

Alonso plunged into church life with a pleasure akin to that which he found in his river bathes. It was a kind of spiritual bathing. The ample, flowing robes which he donned to serve the mass made him feel light and free, as if he had stripped to bathe ; and the silent, spacious, lofty church was like a cool river for his soul. On Sundays the musician of the monastery sat at a small portable organ, a German gem which King Alfonso the Wise had presented to the Monastery over two hundred years earlier, and Alonso took upon himself the task of working the bellows, out of humility, he thought, but possibly also in order the better to hear the lovely instrument.

Music stirred him to the depths. His soul rose and fell with the melodies, remained in suspense during the long modulations of plain chant, seemed to expand and fill up the spacious nave when the voice of the organ reverberated under the vast stone vaults, and was overawed by the inner perfection of the grave major chords as if he were in the very presence of the Lord. This emotion made him think of the dome of the starlit sky. It was as lofty, as vast, as crystal-like in its purity. And yet, in the walks of his soul, as in those Andalusian nights

under the cold and distant stars, there were also sweet scents of the earth, flowers, jessamine and carnations, which moved him with the soft memories of women's breasts, small domes of warm womanhood which troubled his imagination and his senses as, in his religious ecstasies, he cast his eyes on the Mother and Child and found the woman in the mother love. The same word for so many things. Love of God. Love thy neighbour. Love of man and woman. Out of the bronze-pipes of the organ on which Father Frederic was pouring his own ardent soul with his eyes lost in a far-off dream, the soft world flowed past him melodiously, drawing his soul away from him, God knew whither, longing, hoping, guessing, desiring . . . And even after the voice of the organ had died out, his soul remained vibrating with sonorous and emotional memories.

It was a relief to meet Father Guzmán after these painful joys. On week-days, after mass, there was breakfast and a lesson. On Sundays, there was breakfast and a walk with the prior. Alonso enjoyed this opportunity to explore the mysteries he felt in life, with the help of the experienced monk. Love was troubling him deeply. Could love be the remedy for everything? "Love thy neighbour" was the Christian's motto. But Alonso was not sure that it would work. He felt that if he set out to love Vicente Esquivel—assuming he could contrive such a thing—it would not work and Vicente would merely exploit him and laugh at his love. "It depends on what you mean by love," argued the prior, "'Love is works and not words,' says a proverb which our Lord Jesus Christ would have liked. Works. You must show your love in works. But it does not follow that you must please whom you love. 'He who loves you well will make you weep,' says another proverb."

Alonso liked this very much even though he did not understand it fully. It seemed to him to combine the soft and the hard worlds in a most happy manner. "Love," added the monk, "really means, not that you must do what your friend wants but that you must do what you think best for your friend." "But who am I——" "Yes," cut in the prior, "you have read the Gospels. You don't want to be your brother's keeper. But if you act with complete self-denial, God will tell you what is best."

In this advice Alonso found that mental rest for which he had striven so long. His proud soul, eager for high endeavour, felt that self-denial was the true achievement of high-minded men. Pride and humility melted into one in this choice of the self as the worthiest of all enemies. Henceforward he would know how to tackle life. And on the way home he let his hungry horse gallop towards the stables, while he felt like the king of the world.

He found Antonio training a peregrine falcon which had been brought to Don Rodrigo by a Moorish dealer. "Strange, sir," Antonio had said to his master, "why should Moors be dealing in peregrines? They are northern birds, as reliable as good Old Christians."

"I don't know," answered Don Rodrigo, "this fellow comes our way now and then, generally with *Tagarot* falcons from Africa."

"Ah," retorted Antonio, "that is another matter. I don't think much of *Tagarots*. I don't like their colour nor their size. And then, sir, once an African, always an African. They fly back and leave you in the lurch."

As he spoke these words, he saw the Moor who had sold the falcon talking to Leonor at the far end of the garden. "Do you see that?" he asked Don Rodrigo. "Once an African always an African. God grows them and they come together, as we say in Castille."

"Let each mast carry its sail, as we also say in Castille," answered Don Rodrigo pointedly, "and attend to this bird. She looks fine. I would not sell her to the King of France for fifty gold francs." And he lifted his gloved left arm on which the bird stood, proud and slightly ridiculous, with her head under the ruff-hood, made of old, dark, greasy leather. She was white and slightly fawn-coloured, with a yellowish pattern on the breast or "mail," with long wings and sharp claws. Antonio inspected her with the critical eye of the expert.

"She looks to me like those painted ones who run after doves more willingly than after wild duck or heron. We'd better make her wear double bells to keep her quiet."

"She's quiet enough," observed Don Rodrigo. "God knows what meat she may have had to eat while she was in the hands of the infidels," put in Antonio by way of explanation, "Dog at best, I should imagine."

He ran indoors and presently came out with a long leather glove and other implements to dress the bird. "Here, sir," he offered, gloving his left arm. "No, I will hold her. Go ahead." Antonio tied the leather jesses round the bird's legs and fastened two silver bells to each leg with the bewits, performing these delicate operations with so much skill that he hardly touched the sensitive bird.

"Now, the hood!" said Antonio.

"Don't you think we'd better go indoors for that?"

"No, sir. We'll manage here very well. It's just a knack." He held in his hand the falcon-hood of the Manriques, made of red leather with the arms of the family in gold. With light fingers he drew

the old rufferhood backwards, while holding the new one over the eyes, then with a swift movement, he took off the one and put on the other before the bird could realise what was happening. A fluttering of wings was her only reaction and she fell back into the offended and haughty position she had assumed since her arrival.

She looked the part now, with her shiny silver bells and red hood. Antonio gloved his arm and transferred the bird to it. The Moor was coming towards them. "Hallo," said Antonio between his teeth, "You've dropped the lady, have you? I wonder for how long?" And when the falconer had come close to them, he asked, "When did you feed her last?" The Moor was a "latinado," as the Moors who spoke Castillian were called in those days. Yet his explanations were by no means clear or satisfactory. "Look here," said Antonio, "have you stolen this bird? Or have you been starving her?"

There was a flash of anger in the Moor's eyes, but he kept silence, and shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of contempt towards the Christian dog. Antonio walked away as proud as the bird, who, blind and capped, stood on his arm, queen of the winged folk, disdaining all food but that which she could eat alive.

Antonio resolved on the bold experiment of testing her at once with the lure, for he suspected that the falcon had already been trained and was by no means wild. He bade a page bring a lure, a rough imitation of a hen, made of hen-feathers tied to a stick, and hid a live hen under it. Then by way of ingratiating himself and his voice with the coy animal, he offered her small bits of hen-meat while speaking to her. The falcon snapped at the meat with claw and beak and ate with an appetite which made Antonio cry out: "Not even dog-meat, I bet. She is ravenous!"

Alonso turned up. The bird was tied to a creance and Alonso with the page took the lure a long distance away. Antonio stood with his back to the sun. When the lure was well in sight, he took the hood off the bird's head. She rose in the sky, circled once or twice and swooped on the prey. The page was so thrilled by the graceful swing of the bird's flight that he forgot to snatch the lure away from her, and before Antonio had had time to swear at him, the peregrine had savagely clawed the hen's throat to pieces and was feasting on the panting body.

Antonio came running up in despair, pouring forth his indignation in a torrent of obscene oaths and uncomplimentary references to the page's maternal pedigree. Alonso, with his eyes wide open, flooded with a strange new light, seemed to be fascinated by the bloody spectacle. He experienced a profound horror and disgust at the sight of all that bleeding flesh which the falcon was devouring with a joy which made her wings shake and flutter in the air. The whole thing

seemed to him obscene. Antonio noticed his drawn, tense features, and thoroughly misunderstanding him, he exclaimed proudly, "A noble bird indeed !"

14

While Antonio and Don Rodrigo were dressing the peregrine, the Moor was talking to Leonor. He glanced around him, then said in Arabic, between his teeth : " Daughter, do you speak Arabic ? "

" Allah be blessed, I am one of his," answered Leonor. The Moor's eyes flashed. " Could you help me to find a ewe-lamb we have lost ? " Leonor was surprised. The Moor went on : " I have been a few years at it. I have a friend in Marrakesh ; he is powerful and young. He has promised me a reward if I ever find a ewe-lamb he lost long ago when he was a boy, just after the fall of Granada."

Leonor's eyes grew wider and wider. She was white with emotion and her heart beat wildly in her breast. " His . . . name ? " she asked in a whisper. " Hussein," answered the Moor cautiously. " Hussein . . . what ? " The Moor looked at her with some hesitation, and at last let go : " Hussein ben Raman."

Leonor was unable to speak for a while. The Moor looked at her with eyes full of curiosity and hope. " What is the name of that . . . person he seeks ? " she asked at last. " Marién." This time she was not white. She blushed crimson. " I am Marién." Cool and almost unconcerned, the Moor fumbled under his garments and extracted a small gold and silver locket from his purse. " Have you anything like this in your possession ? " Leonor pulled up the slender gold chain at her neck until her own locket appeared from under her silk bodice. " Here it is." They put them side by side. They were identical. " The Christian dogs are looking at us," the Moor muttered slyly. " Farewell. You shall hear more of this."

Leonor ran to her room. She was so shaken with emotion that she was afraid to show it, and, feigning ill-health, remained indoors for the rest of the day.

15

Antonio, who was amphibious, born by the sea-shore, of fishermen and sailors, was fond of swimming and he converted his ward to his favourite sport. The best spot in the river was a few miles down from Torremala, where it left the rocky, hilly land and slowed down its

pace on meeting the soft clay, even as a man slows down his tempo on leaving his early struggles for the soft comforts of his ripe years. The river widened there into a translucent sheet, in whose silky surface the blue skies and the green trees enjoyed a liquid mobility and melted into each other as in some beautiful, contemplative eyes. Alonso and Antonio used to gallop towards that spot at the end of their hot afternoon's ride, when the setting sun, glancing through the trees, lit the green-blue water with glimmers of golden splendour. Antonio came thirsty for a bathe, and stripped in a hurry; but Alonso, touched to the quick by the beauty of the scene, would stay on horseback, motionless, spellbound for long, long moments, lost in a dream of sheer sensuous enjoyment. "Come on, you laggard! Are you afraid of the sharks?" shouted Antonio humorously, shaking the water with his powerful arms, blurring the liquid landscape with wavelets.

One evening (they had bathed earlier than usual) as they came back from their bathe, they met Marta Esquivel trotting on an ass in the opposite direction and as it seemed to Antonio, rather in a hurry. She blushed as she passed them. Alonso did not notice her trouble, for he had never paid any attention to her; but Antonio grinned knowingly, and even grumbled: "Hum! I wonder what this wench is up to. Seems to have a lot of heat to spare!..." Alonso rode on, unconcerned, miles away from the situation.

Marta had remained faithful to her first love through the years. Indeed, as the boy grew, she found him every year more handsome and more desirable. Hidden behind the shutters of her house, she used to watch him pass on his horse, and had always managed to keep posted about his movements, so as not to miss a single glimpse of him. She was not long in detecting the change brought about in Alonso's daily round of activities when Antonio discovered the bathing pool, and as soon as she realised that her darling stripped there in the open air every afternoon, her hot, sensuous nature had no rest, for her ardent imagination put before her mind vivid scenes of the lovely youth which she might be enjoying, at least with her eyes, if she only dared.

She fought against temptation for many a day, but in the end she yielded, and prepared her plans with the utmost care. She began by riding to the spot early one morning when she was sure to meet no one there. She had no difficulty in finding the exact place. The trees marked by the horses' reins where the horses were tied up, the grass trampled by the hooves and nibbled by the hungry beasts, the water's edge bearing fresh marks of the men's feet, all the traces of frequent visits, defined the spot unmistakably. Marta went on to choose her own station. Her aim was to see without being seen. She wandered about patiently, for she had the whole morning before her, till she

found what she wanted. There was a small cape which jutted into the bathing pool. It was quite close to the bathers, yet in order to reach it by land, one had to walk round the meadow quite a long way. From the water, it was difficult to reach, for it had muddy, slippery banks. On this little promontory grew several trees, and in particular a gigantic chestnut which offered two possibilities as an observation post : the first was its leafy top, far from inaccessible for so eager and so agile a person as Marta ; the second was a big cavity in its trunk, with its entrance opening towards the wood which, though closed towards the water, could be fitted with a few convenient holes. She had nothing handy to pierce the bark and reserved that operation for another visit, but she was fully satisfied that, in that season and for some time to come, the tree-top would afford her ample protection.

Her next task was to find a safe corner for her donkey. This was not difficult, for beyond the little promontory the wood sank three or four feet down into a delightfully quiet meadow which any ass in his senses would covet. Much satisfied with her reconnaissance work, Marta returned home, and her mother noticed that her eyes were shining with a new fire.

16

The first time Marta achieved her end, she discovered that pleasure may sometimes be more unbearable than pain. She arrived at her spot by a roundabout way, tied up her ass and climbed into the tree, where she found a comfortable and well-hidden seat. Presently, the two cavaliers arrived. Antonio stripped quickly and Marta lost no detail of it, for though she was quite a young woman now, she had kept alive the curiosity of a sensuous but ignorant child. As part after part of the virile body became visible, she felt more and more anguished and tense ; and her discomfort was becoming well-nigh unbearable when Antonio relieved her by disappearing into the water with a noisy splash. Meanwhile Alonso, the object of her desires, was still on horseback, smiling at some unknown dream within himself. She saw him sideways. He had taken off his hat and hung it from the saddle, and his golden hair fell in long, soft locks over his neck and shoulders. Marta was drinking in the beauty of his profile, carved like a medal on a dark green background ; his long, clear-cut forehead, his aquiline nose, the mouth with a thin upper lip and an underlip a little fuller and more curved, and the chin, graceful though definite and firm. His eyes were far, far away, beyond the river and the woods. While still dreaming, he had slowly disengaged his feet from the stirrups, and with a sudden bound alighted on the soft grass. Marta's heart began

to beat faster. Alonso tied up his horse and began to undress. He had turned his back to the spot where Marta watched every one of his movements with a growing anxiety. She saw his back shining in the setting sun, then the rest of his body ; but her hot, sensuous love longed for a front view which would reveal that sex she had so often imagined in her dreams. "Come on ! " shouted Antonio, splashing in the water. Alonso shook himself from his languorous dream and turned round. Marta saw him all as he was, standing on the water's edge, facing her, beautiful, free, flooded with air and sun, vigorous like a youthful god. Her heart beat violently and she felt so overpowered by desire that she was afraid she would faint and fall. She fought hard to remain motionless for fear of revealing her presence, but was unable to prevent a movement of her legs. A long, thin branch shook down and up again. Antonio, who had come to the shore, saw the movement of the tree. "How odd ! " he shouted, amidst splashes of water, "That long branch has moved as if the bird it carries were as big as——" She did not hear the rest, for both men swam away from where she sat in agony, holding her breasts with trembling hands. Still shaking with suppressed emotion she crawled away and galloped home, beating her ass madly, partly out of fear of being overtaken, partly to let off the hot fury which she felt against herself.

17

Antonio's temperament, always high, was then particularly excited, not merely because of the season, for they were in the spring and all nature was riggish, but because he had lost his woman, a young girl whom he "protected" and frequented, who lived with her mother by the river. Some poisonous fever had taken the girl away in a few days and Antonio, vigorous and sensuous, but unsentimental, felt the loss in his body which asked imperiously for a mate. His mind became full of obscenity and his heart full of schemes. One day, as he wandered in the garden, ill-humoured and dissatisfied with everything and everybody, he saw a feminine figure in the distance. She was walking away from him, and the rhythm of her walk, the graceful alternance of the poise now on the one now on the other hip, filled him with pleasure, admiration and desire. She stopped before a row of flower pots and stooped, plunging her head into the mass of colour ; and Antonio, who had walked on at a pace quickened by his emotions, guessed the thrill of sensuous delight which ran through the sensitive spine as the heady scent of the carnations penetrated her nostrils. During that brief instant, Antonio had possessed her in imagination and resolved

to possess her in fact. She rose with a sigh and turned round unexpectedly. Antonio blushed up to his hair like a boy caught in some forbidden action : Leonor was looking at him, puzzled, slightly anxious, and, as always, sad.

She was not thirty yet. Sorrow had kept thin and svelte a figure which, in peace of mind and body, might have grown beyond the bounds of elegance ; her golden pallor enhanced the beauty of her deep, wide, black eyes ; and her bluish black hair cut across her forehead in a slanting curve like the wing of a bird. She had very long lashes which cast a semblance of mental peace over her face ; and her rich mouth had retained the contemptuous curl of her days of power. Antonio did not fail to perceive this touch of haughtiness in the way she looked at him, for with a feminine sixth sense, she had sized up much of the hidden situation. He felt subdued, repressed and furious ; he passed on, as if he were going somewhere in a hurry, and thought, as he fled from the encounter : " Only a slave, after all ! "

He went out of the garden into the chestnut wood at a furious pace to burn off his anger ; and as the fresh air cooled down the fumes of his rage, he began to think over the situation. At first it seemed to him pretty simple. Leonor was a slave. Don Rodrigo had never refused him anything. Therefore Leonor would be his. Then he visualised the interview with Don Rodrigo. There was one thing the good-humoured and light-hearted nobleman always avoided if he could : a clash with his wife. He was sure to meet Antonio's request with a *débonnaire* readiness to let him have Leonor on condition Doña Isabel agreed. Now, such a thing was out of the question. There remained only one possibility : that Leonor herself should be a willing party to the transaction. He twirled his moustache, puzzled first, pleased afterwards. " She is a Moor at heart," he thought, " Her mass and prayers are all sham. I will talk to Pérez." Pérez was the clerk of the local office of the Inquisition. He owed many a favour to Antonio, a powerful feudal authority in Torremala. If Pérez were willing—and he would have to be—to threaten Leonor with the Inquisition, she would have to surrender and become Antonio's slave to save her skin.

Very much elated by this plan, Antonio returned home. On his way back he altered it slightly. He would talk first to Leonor. Drawn by some obscure magnet, he passed back by the very path on which he had seen her that morning, and stooped over the flowers on the spot where she herself had stooped. There, between two flower-pots, a small square object drew his attention. He picked it up. It was a small locket of gold and silver, flat, with a thin golden chain. He observed a slit and forced it open with his knife. The contents dis-

appointed him at first. All the locket revealed was a small square piece of leather. It reminded him of one of those "escapularios" which men and women used to wear with some sacred image close to their heart. It had a strong scent of jessamine. It also seemed to have some curious patterns drawn on its surface. On closer examination, he could hardly believe his eyes: the patterns were lines of Arabic script. "I will show it to Alonso and ask him to translate it," he thought. "No, I won't. Silence is best. This can be nothing else than a Moorish escapulario. It fell from her breast. Now she is mine."

18

That night, as Leonor was undressing, she discovered the loss of her *hijab* or amulet. She was deeply upset, for that *hijab* was not merely the secret link which attached her to the religion of her ancestors; it was also the last keepsake she had received from Hussein. She was disconsolate. She knew she would not be able to sleep until she found it. In her mental search for it, she remembered the flower pots and how low she had stooped. She even thought that, while she was smelling the flowers, she had half noticed a movement and a noise. She could not hold her patience. She dressed again, took an oil lamp and went out.

The moon was so bright that she left the lamp behind and walked straight towards the spot. She searched again and again and removed many flower pots, but all in vain. She was giving up hope when she heard steps on the path. It was late and she wondered who that might be; then she remembered that Antonio sat up late sometimes when he happened to have a new falcon to train. She braced herself for the ordeal.

"Have you found it?" he jeered. Caught unawares, she answered naïvely, "No." "How could you? I have got it!" She was nonplussed. "What have you got?" "Your *hijab*," he answered, using the Arabic word, which he had adroitly obtained from Alonso. She felt a pang in her heart and grew pale with fear, anger and humiliation. Her religion desecrated, her secret love-token in strange hands—danger. "Here it is," he said, showing it in the palm of his hand, at a cautious distance. "Give it!" she meant to cry out, but she only, whispered. "On conditions," he answered. "Give it!" she repeated louder, emboldened by his very aggressiveness. "On conditions," he repeated. He found her most desirable under that moonlight which shone in her black hair and cast deep shadows on her neck and shoulders, lightly clad in white silk. "I want you to be my slave. Don

Rodrigo will agree if you are willing. You must be willing." A wave of blood rushed to her heart. She sprang up on him to snatch the locket from his hand, but he was ready. Taller and stronger, he caught hold of her, squeezed her tight, kissed her lips hotly and let her go. "That will teach you!" he said, and walked away coolly with the locket in his hand, indifferent to her disconsolate sobs.

She gave him time to walk out of her sight and, with slow dejected steps went back to her sad solitude. She realised her helplessness only too well. The root fact which gave Antonio his power over her was true. She was not and had never been a Christian and, in her heart, she had remained loyal to her native faith, not out of a deep conviction or from some heroic determination to withstand adversity, but from sheer habit, attachment, warm feeling of herd companionship—all of them natural ways of life which the strange circumstances of the country in which she had grown up had turned into heinous crimes. The Inquisition would condemn her as a depraved heretic for her simple, homely virtues, which by a cruel come-back of history were turned into treason merely because seven hundred years earlier her ancestors had invaded a Christian land. She was fully aware of it all. She knew Don Rodrigo felt himself weak in these delicate matters touching upon the faith, owing to his marriage to a converted Jewess. There was nothing to do but hold out and wait and trust that Hussein would arrive in time to rescue her.

Even this thought, however, which in other circumstances would have thrilled her, had now become but another source of grief. Her locket—*his* locket—had disappeared. If he were to turn up and ask to see it and she were not able to account for it, what would be his attitude? What was he like? Had he grown into a wise and patient man or had he retained the fiery impulsiveness of his boyhood? He was fifteen when they had separated and she was twelve. If he found that such an intimate and precious token of remembrance and love had passed into a man's hands, what would become of her? Leonor could well imagine Hussein reacting violently, which, in the circumstances, would lead to nothing but final separation for both and an Inquisition-dungeon for her. She felt gloomy and dejected, unable to find shelter even in her now hopeless hope.

Time went by. Leonor lived under the shadow of this deadly peril. One day she was lying on her bed, in the dark. It was eleven in the morning, but she felt too unhappy to move and go the round of her

usual household activities. The very ground of life was rocking under her and she was on the edge of succumbing to the fatalism to which her race, though valiant, is so prone. She stood between a danger which was certain—Antonio's threat—and a vague hope—the possible return of Hussein in time to save her. She had heard stories about the Inquisition and knew that, easy-going and even indulgent towards the out and out infidel, the Holy Office was adamant towards those who, like her, professed to be converted while remaining secretly attached to their original faith. And yet she felt certain she could never buy her peace at the cost of her womanhood. At first she had thought of putting the whole story before Alonso, who was so generous and so fond of her ; but what could he do save speak to his father ? Antonio would not listen to the young boy. In short there was nothing for it but to wait and run the risk of the torture and the stake.

There was a knock at the door. She trembled all over. The gardener walked in with a mysterious air. They spoke rarely to each other for fear of evoking suspicion, and always in Castilian. But this time, the first he had ever entered her quarters, he spoke in Arabic : "Allah be blessed. There are good tidings." And he handed her a paper. "Be ready at midnight. Back door of the garden—Hussein." She had just voice enough to whisper, "I will be there." The gardener had vanished.

She sprang to her feet with a sudden inrush of energy and ran after him, trying to call him back, to gain more information. He had disappeared. She dared not come out yet. A sudden thought froze her heart. "Suppose he found me old, or ugly ?" It would be wiser to wait till night. She smiled at herself in the midst of the anguish and the joy. "No," retorted her pride, "he must see me under the light of the sun before I leave with him." She came back to her room from the dark passage where she had lived that long, deep instant of her life in a few seconds and she touched up her dress and face. Then she ventured out towards a new life.

But though brave, she was cautious. It was not merely her appearance that she had in mind. She wanted to give herself time to think over the stolen locket. Should she tell Hussein ? And when ? If she told him before they left she felt sure there would be a violent scene—possibly blood. If she waited till they had left, the danger of a fatal misunderstanding would be much greater. She must have time to make up her mind and, though she would not have been able to say why, she felt that in order to make up her mind, she had first to see Hussein's face.

She went along the dark corridor and upstairs to a room in which Isabel used to spend her winter evenings, a quiet place, always deserted in summer. It had a Moorish window or *mirador* from which

one could see the whole garden without being seen. By the door of Antonio's rooms, which opened out into the garden about midway on the same side of the building, she could see four men: two of them were Antonio and Alonso; the third one was the Moorish falconer who had spoken to her once. The fourth? He kept behind the falconer like a servant. But his bearing was not that of a servant. He was standing with his back to Leonor. Before she was able to see anything which might reveal his identity, her heart began to beat: "It is he, it is he." And Leonor was already certain of it when he stepped forward into the group. Oh that step! She knew it.

Antonio was in a detestable temper. He felt his scheme to secure possession of Leonor had gone awry. It could only succeed if Leonor were cowed by his threat to report her to the Inquisition and fell in with his plans. But if she ran the risk and resisted him, what could he do? Report her? What would he gain by it? The idea that, in so doing, he contributed to the purity of the Christian faith by removing a secret heretic from the community, would have left him cold had it ever occurred to him; but such things do not happen. He was furious against himself and even more furious against Leonor and the whole Moorish world.

The Moorish falconer turned up when he was in this state of mind. He brought a tagarot falcon, proudly perched on his right hand. "I wish you people carried your falcons on the left, as every Christian man ought to do," he said peevishly. "But I am not a Christian," laughed the Moor. "Not much of a falcon, anyhow!" exclaimed Antonio with a contemptuous look at the bird. Alonso meanwhile was scrutinising the bird. He was envying Antonio's ability to judge falcons so easily. The falconer did not seem to mind the uncomplimentary remark on his bird and said in Arabic to his servant, "For the heron we are after I have a better falcon in store." Hussein smiled. Alonso gave them such a glance of intelligence and curiosity that they noticed it straight away and closed themselves like oysters. "How much?" asked Antonio. "Twenty Castellians of gold," answered the falconer. "Too many Castellians for such a Moor," retorted Antonio, and a flash lit up the fiery eyes of Hussein. "Moreover, how do I know she will not fly back to Africa? They always do, these whore-daughters!" Hussein rubbed the fingernails of his right hand over the palm of his left, as though he were sharpening them, and one could hear the noise. It was hot. Antonio unbuttoned his doublet. His shirt was already open. He reached out his hand towards the bird, and in so doing bared his hairy chest. Hussein stepped forward quite close to him, fastened his eyes on his chest for a long moment and suddenly caught hold of the locket and tore it from Antonio's neck with a savage pull.

Behind the thick trellis-work of her mirador, Leonor saw the scene and fell down trembling on a seat. Hussein shouted in Arabic, "You dog!" and to his companion, "Let us go. We need not worry about the bitch. She is filthy." Antonio had drawn a dagger and was on the point of falling on his assailant when Hussein, quicker than he, drew a curved sabre from under his burnous and with a vigorous blow nearly cut his right hand off.

The two Moors hurried to the garden gate. At the gate Leonor was waiting for them. She fell on her knees and tried to put her arms round Hussein's legs. "Listen! Listen!" she cried. But he passed without looking at her, leapt on to his horse and galloped away, while Leonor fell on her face weeping the bitter tears of hope lost for ever.

20

That very morning, with the listless indifference of despair, Leonor told Isabel and Alonso the whole story of her episode with Antonio. In doing so, she had to reveal the two secrets of her life, her attachment to her faith and her love for Hussein, which she had maintained alive during those long, long years. Mother and son were astounded when they realised how long that deep, subterranean life of their Moorish slave had flowed past their eyes; but while Isabel was inclined to brood and philosophise over it, the boy was all for action. "Leonor," he said, "they have not ridden two hours. I saw their horses. They were slow hirelings. I can easily catch up with them. I will explain——" She shook her head, broken, dispirited. But he spoke on and, without waiting to convince her, without listening to his mother's doubts and objections, he ran to the stables, saddled his best horse and galloped away.

The gardener had given him a few hints which put him on the right track. He came upon the two Moors as they rose from a well-earned siesta and were getting ready for another stage in their ride towards the Guadiana river, where a small schooner was discreetly awaiting them. He appeared before them suddenly, so suddenly indeed that Hussein drew his crescent sword. Alonso was quite cool. In Arabic, which added greatly to their surprise, he said, "Peace, Hussein. I come as a friend. See," he added, "I bring no weapons." This detail, due to the youth's rash departure from the castle, turned out to be the chief cause of his success. He told his story simply and at times naïvely, so that, despite the pathetic situation which it revealed, Hussein smiled more than once at his generous, inexperienced version of it, nor did the Moor fail to notice the ingenious efforts of the

Christian boy to minimise and excuse Antonio's errors. In conclusion he proposed that Hussein should return to Torremala to fetch Marién-Leonor.

"But," asked Hussein, "is your father ready to hand her to me?" Alonso had not given a thought to that. "Well! Of course!" answered a voice in him, and another one, a new voice aroused in him by Hussein's question, asked, "How do I know?" He had rushed out of the manor without finding out what his father's attitude would be, and was even beginning to doubt whether he had ever realised all the ins and outs of the position implied by the fact that Leonor was a slave. He hesitated and kept silence. Hussein grew suspicious again. The youth was obviously straight and sincere, but might he not be used as a decoy to make him, Hussein, ride into a trap?

"I have not seen my father since . . . since this morning," he answered at last, "But I feel certain that he will do whatever a Christian *hidalgo* would do in his case and that he will hand Leonor over to you."

Hussein thought it over. He was brave and adventurous. "Very well," he decided, "Let us go back to Torremala and we shall see."

They rode back in silence, Alonso was in a meditative mood. Hussein's question had rammed his complacent, romantic dream as a battering-ram a stage-castle. How could he tell what his father would do? How could he even tell "what a Christian would do"? In fact, how could he tell what was the right thing to do? His mind went back to Father Guzmán, who was his living standard of behaviour in all difficult cases. What would he have advised? "Self-denial and the Lord will point the way"—such was Father Guzmán's golden rule. Very well. Self-denial here meant that he, Alonso, was giving up Leonor, of whom he was so fond, a second mother to him, younger than his own and not so intimate, which in a way, he knew not why, was an added pleasure, but it was definitely so. He was giving her up to this utter stranger. And as soon as he had felt that self-denying mood, it had impelled him to gallop after the two Moors and to bring them back. What was wrong with that? "Several things," answered Father Guzmán in his imagination. "You are bringing back under your protection and word of honour a man who has inflicted a serious wound on a prominent member of your household; and for what are you bringing him back? In order to deliver into his hands, the hands of an infidel, a woman whom your family had made a Christian!" "But she is not a Christian! We know now that she had remained secretly faithful to Islam!" "That," argued Father Guzmán in his dream, "may be but a passing phase. How can you doom for ever to damnation a soul you have in charge? Or do you think we, the

Church, would have allowed you, rich people, to own Moorish slaves if it were not an easy way for us of holding them within the nets of a Christian society?" Thus went his mind to and fro, wondering, questioning, doubting, getting more and more uneasy, as they drew nearer Torremala, about the situation he would find at the castle.

At the ford, four or five miles out, a man was calmly watching his horse drink at the edge of the river. "Suárez, our steward," explained Alonso to his two companions. The falconer knew him well. Suárez rode towards them after they had crossed. "Do not go any further. Stay here by the river. We must first talk matters over." Hussein grew sombre when he heard the message. The sun was setting and down there, by the river, the shadows of the coming night were already covering the hillside. A reddish tinge turned into fluid fishes the wavelets which the evening breeze raised in the water. Suárez knew no Arabic, Hussein little Castilian. Alonso was thankful the falconer knew both. "Your father," explained Suárez, "has been told everything. He is willing to let Leonor depart with this . . . gentleman, and he claims no compensation. But he cannot afford the fact to be known. He has consulted his lawyer and finds the position is too complicated. What we propose is that she should run away. We shall make it easy for her. In fact, everything is ready. If this gentleman and his friend will wait here till the town is asleep—say eleven—Leonor will be here on a better horse than either of these two——" concluded the steward with a slight touch of ironic contempt.

The falconer explained the position to Hussein who turned it over in his mind. He had never quite shaken off the suspicion that he might be trapped. Alonso guessed his mind. It was indeed easy to read it on his impulsive, transparent face, as he glanced suspiciously now at the steward now back at Alonso, as if to recover his confidence in the youthful, straightforward features of Leonor's friend. "If Hussein is afraid to be bored while he waits here," the young cavalier said generously and discreetly, "I am ready to remain with him till Leonor comes." Hussein's manly face reddened. "No," he answered. "Thanks. It would not be fair to you. We shall wait."

They parted. The two Moors remained by the ford; the two Christians rode uphill towards the castle. Alonso's arrival transfigured Leonor. She wept tears of joy and kissed him ardently, indeed with an ardour he had never felt in her, vicariously bestowed on him by a young body hungry for reawakened love, driven by a soul overflowing with gratitude. The few hours that remained were spent in preparations for the journey, promises, remembrances. At last the town was quiet. Don Rodrigo had gone hunting so as to be provided with an alibi; Alonso helped Leonor to mount a splendid Arab mare, parting present from the Manrique household, then mounted his own

horse to escort her to the ford. Hussein and the falconer heard them come. "There are only two horses," said the falconer. A few paces away Alonso said to Leonor, "Farewell. Allah be with you! . . . For ever——" And without waiting for an answer, turned his horse round and vanished swiftly into the night.

When he entered his bedroom, still doubting, wondering, he perceived a strong scent of flowers. A feeble light was burning as usual under an image of the Mother and Child. The room was full of jessamine.

21

He spent the night immersed in that sea of loving aroma, feeling for the first time in his life the bitter sweetness of a true heart-rending separation, one of the deepest pleasures which human sadness has in store for those who know how to taste it. Leonor had been for him, more even than he was aware of, the living door to the world of women. Everything in his relations with her had possessed that velvety quality which he still felt in her eyes and skin. She was loving by nature and she had incarnated love for him even though he had never been in love with her nor been conscious that any sensuous muddiness had ever troubled the clear, limpid quality of their affection.

He gave himself over to his melancholy delight, dreaming of it both awake and asleep during the whole of that night which he spent so close to her in spirit while she rode towards the small caravel that was to take her away to Morocco. But when morning came and he made ready for his early ride, his mood dropped to a more common sort of sadness as he bethought himself of Antonio and his behaviour towards Leonor. For obvious reasons Antonio had never mentioned his private affairs to him. He did not know that his one-time tutor had lost his woman and was on the look-out for "something else." In fact, Alonso had never given a thought to sexual life as such and was unaware of its existence as a separate problem. It grieved him to the heart to find out that it was possible for a man whom his father seemed to trust to put such appalling pressure on a woman to force her to yield to his desires. So he was thinking while his horse was being saddled. He rode away, still brooding over this matter of Antonio's ways of living and thinking, and he remembered that once, as they sat together watching a new falcon through the night, Antonio had suddenly said, "Ah! All women are whores—just like hens!" Alonso had felt the insult to his mother as a slap in the face, and was about to say so when he felt a counter-impulse to protect his mother against the still worse insult of defending her against such a monstrous

assertion. He had kept silent, and his silence had been the first rift in his comradeship with Antonio.

"All women are whores." Imagine ! . . . Yet, below his indignation, he felt the force of something, some kind of fact which lay hidden under Antonio's filthy remark like a clear stone covered with dung. He had often heard the parish priest thunder against women as the very kith and kin of the devil, and with all respect to him, had never been able to agree. But he was also apt to get tired of the lays of the troubadours which his romantic mother was so fond of reading, which depicted women like lilies always incredibly straight and incredibly white. Alonso had discovered in his father's room a book he was then reading with true delight and which this revealing episode of Leonor and Hussein endeared to him even more. Its title was *The Tragicomedy of Calisto and Melibea*. It depicted the adventures of a beautiful girl, who, unable to resist her love for Calisto, who loved her most romantically, had used a procuress as her tool to enjoy her passion without the usual delays. It was a tragic book, as it was bound to be, since the two lovers by their rash action had sown the seeds of their own undoing ; but what appealed to Alonso was that, for the first time in all he had read, he found a woman such as he guessed women to be—not, as the coarse-minded Antonio said, "whores," not as the troubadours seemed to believe, angels, but just the now strong, now weak, companions of men. The passion which he had suddenly discovered in Leonor had opened his eyes to all that world. He felt that in that "love" which he had till then ascribed to the soft world, there was also something hard, hot, possibly destructive, and his mind went back again to that haunting tune and refrain of his mother's song :

Beware of love, for it is a wide, wide sea ! . . .

There was an island in that sea—only one safe, immovable rock to which his eyes turned in distress : the monastery. There, men were at peace. The way to peace was simple : self-denial. Not merely self-denial of this or that on this or that occasion, but self-denial of all life for all time. Once a man had had the courage to face that ordeal and to pass through it unscathed, he was free for ever. It was, he thought, a kind of anticipation of death in order to anticipate the glorious freedom of Heaven. A man like Father Guzmán had given all, but in so doing, he had gained his true liberty. Alonso was beginning to turn his mind towards religious life. He went so far as to speak to the prior about it. "You are too young," the prior answered, "to know for certain whether you are attracted by the monastery away from the world or merely repelled by the world into the monastery."

One hot morning Alonso was riding back home from the monastery through the leafy, shady wood of chestnut trees in which the seething life of myriads of insects kept a high-pitched hum on a constant note like an obligato to the shrill solos of cicadas and crickets. The sun pierced through the foliage in slanting glances which drew capricious patches of light on the deep blue shade, catching in the nets of its light here a racing squirrel, there a performing spider skilfully hanging from a silvery thread. The brook had dried up and the well-washed stones down which it fell in winter shone like the teeth of some yawning giant tied to the earth by the tight-pulled roots of vigorous trees. The birds were drowsy and even the tiny green lizards, despite the early hour, sought the cool shade under the granite rocks for a morning sleep.

Alonso had engaged his horse on the deep sunken path which wound its way down to the ford. He felt happy and more at rest than he had been for a long time. He had again enjoyed one of those conversations with Father Guzmán in which he found so much guidance. And yet, as he sank deeper and deeper into the sombre wood, rich with Earth's life, a feeling crept over him, a kind of uneasiness about all that hidden life within the wood, which his imagination depicted to him as obscene. Did it all happen under God's eyes, or were there corners and caverns in it where the eyes of God never penetrated any more than the rays of the sun? Had it been a thought in his mind, he would have cast it off as a poisonous blasphemy; but it was not a thought; it was less clear, yet more permeating, and it made him feel sick at heart. Spiders eating flies, birds eating worms, all that self-devouring activity of animal nature seemed to him so deeply instilled with the "hard-world" spirit, and yet so natural, so God-made . . .

A plaintive moan brought him back from his dream. He stopped his horse and listened. A moan again, louder. "A woman's voice," he thought. Then, as he looked in the direction whence it had come, he saw a woman lying as it seemed, unconscious, almost naked on a heap of clothes.

He had never seen a naked woman in his life. He felt feelings and emotions new to him. He remained motionless and disconcerted. Shame made him want to look away. A compelling attraction glued his eyes to the spot where the body lay, half in the sun, half in the shade, a curious body, motionless yet neither limp nor lifeless; rather it would seem shaken now and then by a swift thrill. Nothing happened

for some time. And then, from the head hidden in the shaded part under the clothes, another moan, fainter and less assured, came to disturb the dreamy cavalier. 'What should he do? There was something the matter with that woman. Perhaps she had been robbed or otherwise ill-treated; perhaps she was ill. Yet, a kind of instinctive mistrust, possibly an off-shoot of that Eve-and-the-serpent sort of anti-woman feeling which the Church had fostered throughout the Middle Ages, kept him back, suspicious and undecided. In the end, his generous, courageous impulse won. He dismounted, tied his horse up to a tree and penetrated into the thicket.

She did not move save for a slight change in the position of the head which sank deeper under the heap of clothes. She was lying as if in pain, with part of her back covered, but showing all her body from the waist downwards. Alonso's heart was thumping in his breast. He was red with shame and emotion and felt as uncomfortable as he had never dreamt a man could ever feel. "Who are you? What has happened—?" He stood there, not knowing what to do. The woman did not move, did not speak. "Are you hurt?" There was a moan again. She moved round slowly; she had been lying almost on her stomach; gradually she turned round, slowly, slowly, till she offered herself on her back, naked and unashamed, her legs apart, trembling slightly.

The obscene sight of the hen devoured alive by the falcon overpowered Alonso's imagination till it became a hallucination superimposed on that shameless woman open before him, without blotting it out. Woman and hen together in an overpowering confusion seemed to be pouring themselves together in a red-hot torrent through his wide-opened eyes, and filling his heart, his soul, his senses with such a repulsive, fascinating riot of savage, violent sensations that he felt his head swimming as in an oven of red flames. The wood also seemed to be ablaze. The red glow spread to sky and earth until the whole world caught fire and he fell on the ground like a mass of lead.

Marta leapt to her feet. How far from her dreams! How many days had she been rehearsing that scene in the solitude of her cool bedroom, in the fever of her senses and imagination! And now, instead of the end she had expected and enjoyed in advance, here was this tragedy, this appalling tragedy, Was he dead?

She dressed herself in a hurry with her mind in turmoil, wondering what to do, how she would escape, what was wrong with him, should she stay there. She touched his head. It was still hot, very hot. He seemed to move. He had shivered all over as she touched him. Frightened though she was, and afraid of being found out, she had to caress his silky, golden hair.

She withdrew softly to the wood behind, thinking she would wait in hiding and, if he got better, she would let him go; and if he did not move for a long time, she would "turn up" and try to feign she had found him unconscious and run for help. She stood there, sad and anxious. "Little did I think," she mused, "that the first time I would have him in my power would be like this!" Her scheme, born of both hot desire and cool calculation, had been so cleverly contrived! He was bound to think that something had happened to her, to be moved by pity, to come close to her, to support her in his arms—she thrilled from head to foot as the thought of it—and . . . nature would have done the rest. Now, all had miscarried. She had to think out the consequences of her action. She must disappear before he or any one else knew who she was. He would not tell any one of his experience—she thought—except perhaps his confessor. But he himself did not know who she was. She broke off seeing him there, helpless. . . . She wondered whether he would die and felt mortally afraid, overwhelmed by a feeling of love for him just because he had been unable to resist the sight of her body. She had not meant to . . . only just half undressed—but she had been afraid of showing her head too soon and that movement at the end . . . She reddened as she remembered it . . . It had been quite beyond her to avoid it. She had *dreamt* him so often.

She ducked and lay still. Alonso was coming to. He felt a violent headache. He sat up, tried to remember, tried to forget, glancing about the forest, half curious, half afraid lest the woman was still in the wood. He saw no one. He rose to his feet and walked slowly to his horse. He felt very tired. He mounted and rode down a few paces towards the castle, then turned round and retraced his steps. "No. I will go back to the monastery and confess. I do not want to keep all this poison in my conscience."

23

Alonso rode on slowly, in his usual meditative mood. "So that is desire! I don't think much of it. And that girl . . . for she was just a girl . . ." Then something, he could not say what, something about that body suddenly gave him the absolute certainty that she was Marta Esquivel. Moreover, it tallied with her behaviour towards him on previous occasions and with not a few remarks which Antonio had dropped in his presence.

This discovery made him unhappy. There was no doubt that the idea of Marta, and particularly of her body, was repulsive to him. Yet, he had felt a masculine desire while she lay naked before him

and he knew he would have frozen again had he seen her face. How did all that tally with the prior's advice? "Act with complete self-denial?" said the good friar, "and God will tell you what is best." What would have been complete self-denial in this case? To satisfy that girl's desire which made her offer herself to him? To deny her that satisfaction? The monastery was but a few paces away, cold and stony even under the hot summer sun, free from the temptations of the flesh (so he thought in his innocence), and he did not know yet whether he would tell the prior all his spiritual experience as one would to a confessor, or merely report the adventure as one would to a trusted friend. As soon as he was in the presence of the prior, he hesitated no longer. He told him all, even his anguish, even his doubts. "What would God have told him to do in such an awkward situation? Where would self-denial have been? In any case, he had not been in a position to think it over, to act under the impulse of reason, as a good Christian should. He had acted under fiercer and darker impulses." The prior listened in silence. Alonso had finished his story and was waiting for an answer. "Yes. But you must not ask: 'what would have happened?' Ask yourself what was it that actually happened. You fell unconscious. That was God's way to save you from the dilemma which you were not strong enough to solve unhelped."

Alonso had not expected that. He was deeply impressed. He felt drowsy. His eyelids drooped. The friar saw how tired he was, yet did not relent. "You must now go and thank the Lord for His help to resist that temptation which certainly came from the Enemy." He took Alonso to the church, knelt by his side and after a brief prayer, left him with his knees on the hard stone.

"This is indeed a soft-without-hard-within-sort-of-a-world," thought Alonso, struggling to master his drowsiness. He admired the friar for his fortitude and was too proud to be content with showing a lesser strength himself. He held fast to his decision to pray, to his stubborn determination to concentrate his conscious thoughts on God. Gradually he came to endow his struggle with a kind of material and luminous reality—his will to prayer was like a light, a glow, which now advanced, now receded before his drowsiness, exteriorised in a kind of fog of darkness. It was indeed like a battle between the host of light and the host of darkness. In the midst of the struggle, the Mother and Child which he had last seen on the chief altar, seemed to be wafted by woolly, white clouds, now in the dark now in the light. It seemed to him that the battlefield was crowded with strange beings, probably human, yet different from any man he had ever seen—reddish, naked or nearly, armed with light wooden bucklers and long, copper-pointed spears, wearing huge feather-crests which hung from their hair. "Who can this people be?" he wondered. Then, strangest

of all, the Mother and the Child also changed their appearance. The Child, in whom he had so often seen himself in his infancy, was indeed like him, but also like those warriors ; and the Mother was a beautiful girl of reddish hue and auburn-black hair, who wore between her breasts a heart of a greenish, shiny stone which he had never seen before.

A friar found him asleep on the steps of the altar.

24

Antonio had lost the friendship and the company of his young master and the two one-time inseparable companions now avoided each other. Alonso spent more time than ever in the monastery. He was hours in the prior's cell, studying religious books, and hours also praying in the church. As for Antonio, after weeks of medical attention, he had recovered the use of his right hand and was beginning to move about as before his violent scene with the Moor. Marta, who always managed to observe the life of the manor, noticed that he had resumed his daily afternoon rides to the bathing pool in the river outside the town.

She was much excited. Her adventure in the wood had left her in a curious state which resolved itself in an irresistible attraction towards Antonio. Deep down she was still possessed of sensuous love for Alonso. She belonged to Alonso Manrique, body and therefore soul, for her soul was but the servant of her active, feverish and sensuous body. But since the scene in the wood, Alonso had become for her a forbidden thought. It hurt when she thought of him. She dreaded the approach of his image to the field of her day-dreams, and as for his actual person, she avoided him so studiously that she had not cast eyes on him since that fateful day.

She now centred her sensuous brooding on Antonio. She was so used to those concrete dreams that she had to call a partner out of the depths of her dark bedroom to share in them, and now that Alonso was forbidden, she had become used to call in Antonio as a substitute. She had often seen him almost naked in the river. When she noticed that he began to frequent the river again—and alone—her joy knew no bounds and she lost no time in following him there.

One calm afternoon in September, as she arrived with her donkey at the hiding-place she had discovered the previous year, and, after tying the animal under the rock, was going to settle in the hollow inside the tree, she found half a loaf of stale bread and a goodly piece of hard Manchegan cheese in the hole. "A tramp must have been sleeping

here," she thought, She paced about the meadow and the wood, in case he were still in the neighbourhood, and finding no one, dismissed the subject ; yet she did not settle in the hollow but climbed to the branches as she had done on other occasions.

Antonio was swimming some distance away but was coming back towards her hidden observatory. She had, of course, lost some time looking for that ghostly tramp. He climbed ashore, rolled himself in the grass and began to don his clothes. She was enjoying herself thoroughly, for she liked his manly body, and was at the height of her joys . . . when the ass began to bray vociferously. Antonio looked up and guessed at once what was happening. She was so taken aback and stupefied that, instead of staying where she was, she slid hurriedly to the ground, only to feel two robust arms, naked and wet, which seized her roughly, almost furiously, by the shoulders, threw her violently on the grass and tore her clothes from her. Antonio was bursting with unspent, masculine rage, a rage which Leonor's flight from his clutches had exasperated. He beat her buttocks savagely with his hands while pouring a cataract of the coarsest insults on her, turned her over and forced her, meeting first with but little opposition, then with a most ardent enthusiasm.

25

When he walked away she remained motionless, with her eyes shut, utterly indifferent to anything that might happen outside her dream. She had just lived a deep and strange experience. What for Antonio had been a release of dammed-up energies without any but the purest animal significance, had been for her an all too brief instant of bliss, in which she had given herself to Alonso's being through Antonio's body. By a marvellous alchemy, that thought of Alonso which she had eschewed for weeks had returned in all its triumphant trepidation to take possession of her soul as soon as Antonio had touched her body. Her joy was none the less intense for being vicarious, and she remained there on the grass, still overwhelmed by the revelation of deep-down sensations which her mind and soul attributed and traced back to Alonso.

Antonio meanwhile, calmed by his unexpected treat, went back to his clothes, smiling half fatuously half humorously over the "hot wench." "They are all the same," he thought, thinking of women in general. "Always ready to oblige !" and he shrugged his shoulders. He had finished dressing, yet felt something missing. "What is it ?" he wondered. "Ah, my dagger." He searched the grass for it, went

down to the edge of the river, came back again to the grass and finally gave it up. "I must have left it behind in the house," he said, and with another shrug of his shoulders he mounted his horse and rode away without even troubling to glance at Marta, still dreaming in her quiet nook by the meadow.

Meanwhile Calero, a few yards away from the spot where Marta lay on the grass, hidden from her by a drop of several feet and an overhanging, natural construction of roots and earth, was quietly eating his bread and cheese. He was cutting his cheese with Antonio's dagger and was sitting on a red flannel underskirt which Marta had been wearing when she arrived, but wore no longer when, slowly, drowsy with the new life in her, she left for home. Calero ate in blissful peace, chuckling to himself now and then and now and then uttering mysterious monosyllables, drops of his peculiar philosophy which he distilled in solitude. When the shadows of the night began to pour drafts of ink on the river, he rose leisurely, climbed to the upper level, where Marta had been lying and dreaming for so long, and went straight to the hollow tree with the firm and self-assured step of the householder in his own garden. He folded the red underskirt neatly, held it with his left hand against the inner side of the bark in the hollow of the tree and with a vigorous blow of his right, drove the dagger into the tree through the flannel garment. "I believe the point must have gone right through the bark!" he said proudly.

He crawled into the hole and went to sleep.

26

Marta lived for weeks in a kind of enchantment. Alone most of her days and all her nights, she had wrapped herself up in a world of her own creation, born partly of fancy, partly of remembrance. The centre and sun of this world was a mixture of her two hot experiences, with Alonso in the forest, with Antonio by the river, melted into one single blissful union with the handsome Manrique. Her mother was used to her solitary ways and did not attach much importance to her self-absorbed state. But a time came when Marta refused to eat and later when she was constantly sick. Esquivel spoke of calling in the doctor, but Susana's opinion prevailed and the Esquivels kept their daughter's condition to themselves, at any rate for the time being. Susana was beginning to suspect that Marta was with child. Marta, however, was indifferent to everything but her dreams, which not even her sickness prevented her from enjoying. A time came when her state became obvious to her and to her mother. Susana asked her

point blank who was the father of her child, and Marta, without hesitation, answered : "Alonso Manrique."

She had spoken the truth—her truth. It mattered little to her that the flesh which had actually fecundated her was that of Antonio. She had given herself to Alonso, and she was utterly unable to disentangle herself from the warm embraces of her dream. Susana was overwhelmed. Hatred was the chief passion which emerged from her soul ; hatred for the tyrannous family whose power had thrown them back on to their needy state when time and again Esquivel's bold or shrewd strokes were on the eve of conquering wealth for them—for the family which had deprived her of her son (that is how she had come to feel about it) and which now dishonoured her foolish daughter. Still fuming with repressed fury, she broke the news to Esquivel.

"Where? When?" barked Esquivel at his daughter. "In the wood, by the river," answered Marta, still mixing up the two events. Esquivel was almost happy to be able to inflict such a humiliation on the Manriques, and, without troubling to master the facts, rushed to the manor, whipping his indignation into a frenzy.

"I must see him at once!" he shouted at Suárez who tried to bar the door of Don Rodrigo's room to him. Don Rodrigo came out with a piece of raw meat in his hand. He was feeding his favourite falcon, whom he often kept in his own room. "What is the matter?" he asked. He saw Esquivel and without waiting to listen to his request, said, "Come in, come in. What is the matter?"

"The matter is, sir, my daughter is with child by your son!" Don Rodrigo was very much upset. Months—was it years?—earlier, Antonio had given him a perfunctory report of Marta's infatuation and even said something about the river and so forth, but he had not attached the slightest importance to the subject. He went to the door and called Suárez. "Ask Antonio to come here at once." Esquivel waited in silence, enjoying his vengeance beforehand. Presently, Antonio arrived, saw Esquivel's face and guessed what was afoot.

"Antonio, Esquivel says his daughter is pregnant."

"I am not surprised, sir."

Esquivel triumphed. "What do you know about it?" asked Don Rodrigo dryly.

"Well, sir, when a who—. . . I mean a wench sports by the river with a man who knows his way about, the midwife is sure to get busy nine months later. . ."

"But—" Don Rodrigo was puzzled. Antonio smiled a cynical smile. "I can even say when the happy event is due—to the day!"

Esquivel was beginning to lose confidence. Antonio went on,

turning sharply to Esquivel : " You rascal . . . Forgive me, sir . . . You rascal, go and tell your daughter that she knows full well I am responsible for whatever she has in her belly, unless she has been lying with half the town since, which would hardly surprise me ! "

" You are a liar ! You want to cover your master," shouted Esquivel, shaking his fist. Don Rodrigo was pained and humiliated. With a steely glance, he paralysed Antonio who was ready to leap at Esquivel's throat and, turning to Esquivel, he said : " I am not a liar. I will see that this business is cleared up. I will have it inquired into by the prior. But woe to you if you or your daughter are found wrong."

Esquivel left the room with his soul more tortured than ever by anger and hatred.

27

His first impression was that he was the victim of a well-staged conspiracy concocted by Don Rodrigo and Antonio to screen Alonso. Antonio took the blame and—what of it ? " That is why "—Esquivel thought—" Don Rodrigo generously steps aside and hands the case over to the prior who, of course, will never find against his darling Alonso ! " So went his mind, nursing his grievance. Yet there was something in Antonio's insolent attitude which made him at times doubt his daughter's veracity. The thought made him see red. " I would kill her ! " And he gnashed his teeth.

This was the mood in which he confronted his daughter. Marta was terrified and fear made her stand by her story when a quiet examination might have resolved it into its component parts and allowed the truth to be revealed. She stubbornly insisted on her version and when asked to give details, told a tale which began as the scene in the wood and ended as the scene by the river—as she had come to embroider it. Some of her details were so telling, so true, that she succeeded in convincing her father and even her perspicacious mother, that she had told them the truth.

The news spread like wildfire, no one could say exactly how. Torremala spoke of nothing else. Some took the girl's side, some the boy's, even when admitting that he was responsible for Marta's mishap. Esquivel had lost much of his power over the crowd, but he could still put a case forcibly. When he felt certain that Marta had told the truth and when, moreover, he found that the episode had become public property, he moved heaven and earth to make his case popular. Marta had no idea of the grief she was inflicting on Alonso

whom she thought she loved. Self-centred as most sensuous persons are, she found an ineffable pleasure in exhibiting herself as the woman Alonso had possessed. It was as if she were possessed by him again every time a new person came to know of it or to talk about it.

This public discussion, gossip and so to speak, ownership of a matter so delicate and intimate was most painful for Alonso. At first he had taken the incident with relative calm. Hurt and insulted, he had quickly reacted and even felt compassionate towards the poor, misguided girl. He knew that no one amongst those whose opinion mattered to him would ever believe her, least of all Father Guzmán who had heard his confession after the scene in the wood. But when every one talked about it, he realised that there were two persons in him : his real self and his social self, the person as seen by the community in which he lived ; and he clearly saw that at the moment this second person stood, to say the least, blurred and confused by Marta's story even in the eyes of those who did not believe her.

Father Guzmán did his best to help him and so did his mother. Both however were bound to acknowledge that nothing they could do or say, not even the prior's word, could fully restore the youth's good name. Some sort of independent witness or proof was indispensable. This was an appalling fact. Truth, the faith of the Lord, shines not of its own in the eyes of men. It must receive the borrowed light of human witnesses. Alonso suffered deeply at this thought, but the prior and his mother repeated to him : "Trust God. He will speak and save you."

28

Father Guzmán had finished his inquiry. He had not been long in coming to the conclusion that the girl was either lying outright or deluding herself under the devilish spell of lust. But he kept adjourning his decision in the hope that the Lord would provide a better way out. The town was getting excited. There were some hot-heads amongst the simple people who were restive and even spoke of giving a lesson to those persons of the manor who seemed to think that all the women belonged to them. Esquivel fanned these flames, though more discreetly than in his younger days, when he had led the riots against the Jews. The day it was announced that Father Guzmán would give his award, a group of these hot-heads was seen marching along the avenue towards the castle. They were shouting : "Down with the tyrants !" Some of them were armed with spades, forks, scythes. They seemed to have

no leader. Esquivel was nowhere to be seen. Calero, of course, joined the battalion. He marched alongside their troop with as much enthusiasm as any of them. After a little while he began to mix with them, going here and there, whispered : " I know where it is hidden ! " No one paid him any attention at first, but by the time the troop had reached the terrace in front of the castle, nearly every one had heard him at least once saying pointedly and mysteriously : " I know where it is hidden," and though no one could tell for certain what he meant, all felt that he had the key to the mystery which had puzzled the town. The matter reached the ears of Father Guzmán, who was in the castle, where he had summoned Esquivel and the authorities of Torremala. The prior had no doubt that the Lord meant to speak through this, the humblest of the inhabitants of Torremala. He had Calero called to his presence. " I know where it is hidden," repeated Calero like a parrot. " Very well," said the prior. " Show the way."

Calero moved off, crossing the troop of hot-heads who, out of countenance, stood on the terrace, solemn and silent, their spades, forks, scythes, resting on the ground. The prior followed Calero. Esquivel followed the prior. Antonio followed Esquivel. The crowd followed Antonio like sheep. The whole town, seeing the strange procession, followed down the avenue in the wake of its fool. Don Rodrigo saw it all from his window, and unable to restrain his curiosity, followed them also with Suárez, at a distance, on horseback. Alonso and his mother remained together, praying in their private chapel.

The fool led the town to the riverside, to the spot he knew well. There, round the meadow, every one took a seat, on the grass, on the edge of the upper level plain, even on top of the trees. They all seemed to expect something. Calero led the friar, Esquivel and the town authorities to the tree which was his only abode. He showed them a spot on the tree where the point of Antonio's dagger could be felt, if not seen, and to make it patent to all, he cut his fingers on it, showing his bleeding hand to the crowd afterwards. This done, he took his audience round to the hollow side, made the principals look and see what was in it, then struggled with the handle till he had pulled the dagger out, showing it to the audience with the girl's garment cut through by the point of steel. He looked round, saw Antonio, and delivered the dagger into his hands ; looked round again, saw Esquivel and delivered the flannel underskirt into his hands.

Everybody in Torremala knew that Alonso wore no dagger. Every one in Torremala knew the dagger of Don Rodrigo's chief officer. The crowd flocked back discussing the scene. Esquivel vanished. No one had the cruelty to collar him there and then. The prior fell on his knees. Don Rodrigo watched the scene from a distance, in silence.

When the news of his final vindication and release from shame reached Alonso, he was still in prayer in his mother's chapel. He had gone through weeks of agony and that morning, for the first time, in the subdued light of that haven of silence and solitude, he had felt some comfort enter his heart. Till then the sight of the world wallowing in muddy error about him had made him sick of the world. He felt unable and unwilling to cope with it. He realised—as indeed every one in his family and amongst his friends at the monastery did—that there was nothing to be done by merely human means to wash him clean of a crime he had not committed. This was the thought to which his mind came back again and again. The world, therefore, he thought, is not in the hands of men. It belongs to the devil until God makes up His mind to take matters in hand. He remembered a picture of Jesus he had seen in the monastery, carrying the world in His hand. "Yes," he mused, "that is it. Only He lets it go now and then."

This experience made him feel to what an extent he was in the hand of God. And through this feeling of powerlessness, unexpectedly, he reached his peace. He was sure he would not be let down by God, since he was innocent. He had not heard the doggerel then current amongst the battered, cynical veterans of the Moorish wars :

Came the Moors, as come they would,
And they beat us all like mad,
For God always helps the bad
When they're stronger than the good.

He was too young and inexperienced to have tasted that blasphemous doubt and in his eyes his innocence was the rock on which stood the unchallengeable castle of his faith.

So when his father galloped back and brought the story of the dramatic scene by the riverside he was happy, but not surprised. He had grown considerably in the last two years and was as tall as his father, thin and pale. He wore his golden hair long as was the fashion then and he was clean shaven. His blue eyes shone with a serene joy. God had done it. And through the fool, too! What better sign? There was no safe anchor but God in the wicked world. He glanced at his mother significantly and she glanced back with a grave smile. Alonso turned towards his father, fell on his knees and said :

"Sir, I beg your leave to enter a monastery to-morrow. I want to serve the only Lord."

PART V

XUCHITL MEETS THE GHOST

I

THE GHOST was settling down in Xuchitl's mind, even more perhaps than she realised, and was most active in the cellar under her thoughts. She felt more and more that neither her father nor Ixcawatzin could speak to her as directly as the ghost would, if she could only meet the Phantom-Queen. And yet she let days, weeks, months, even years go by and did nothing to gain access to the haunted apartments. Respect erected a barrier between her and her father ; Ixcawatzin paralysed her by his self-assurance, particularly over things which seemed far from certain to her. Then, why not the ghost? She was afraid. Was it a good ghost? Citlali was positive that one had to be very brave with ghosts, or else one paid with one's life. Xuchitl was no coward, but when it came to ghosts, she had no experience of herself, and hardly knew how she would behave. Then there was the difficulty of getting at the ghost. How difficult it was, she could hardly tell, for in fact, she had not tried.

She disliked this idea. She ought to have tried. Why, she did not know. It was a self-imposed obligation. Why she had not tried, she knew. Because she did not dare. This was the thought she did not like. She took refuge in work.

She disliked Ixcawatzin. How could such a handsome youth be hard enough to approve of little Sparrow's death? "You are a selfish girl," he had scolded, "to weep and whine because a child you happened to love is given to the gods in order to ensure a good harvest. What right have you to keep that child for yourself?"

"Not for me, but for his mother," argued Xuchitl.

"What right has his mother? He is not his mother's child only, but the child of all his grandfathers and great-grandfathers, that is the child of all the people. So, when he dies for the people, he just gives back what he had been given."

"But," retorted Xuchitl, "to kill him! He was so happy!" "He is happier now, sucking flowers in Paradise as a humming bird." She hated him.

"What do we read to-day?" she asked Ixcawatzin that morning. She had grown a good deal during that year and was catching him up, or at least feeling that she was more on a level with him in stature,

though he was growing also. When they sat together, her shoulder nearly reached his. She had caught him once or twice looking at her in silence while she worked hard by his side. She was beginning to wonder what he felt about her. She hated him. There was no doubt about that. He thought he was always right. And he was not.

"We will read the story of Nezawal Coyotl, your grandfather——"

"And yours," cut in Xuchitl.

"And mine, and the story of his wife Azcalxuchitl."

They opened a book. Xuchitl read and Ixcawatzin corrected her mistakes.

"King Fasting-Dog was sad, for, though rich in concubines, he had not yet found a wife. He did not want a mere princess. He wanted a woman whose attraction he would not be able to resist. Huitzilihuitl, the sorcerer, had given him a precious amulet: it was a heart of jade——"

She stopped short. He noticed it less than he would have done otherwise because these words had set him dreaming of the night in Nezawal Pilli's room when he had seen a heart of jade, bleeding fresh tears of blood, on the king's breast. While he dreamt, Xuchitl mastered her emotion; she was thinking of the ghost's passionate cry, which she had heard the night of the New Fire; she felt that she might be just then on the threshold of the mystery and she grudged the share of the revelation which Ixcawatzin would gain. But she soon realised that it was imperative to read on: "——a heart of jade wherewith to enjoy bliss in love, on condition that it were worn only when embracing an irresistible woman. King Fasting-Dog had never met a woman whom he could not resist or even do without; but one day, as he went to Tepechpan, Cuacuauhtzin, lord of the town, received him as a king should always be received and had him served at table by his lovely girl-wife Azcalxuchitl, still a virgin. As soon as he saw her, the king knew he could not do without her and he longed for his heart . . . of . . . jade . . ." Xuchitl could not read those words as quickly as the rest of the story. Ixcawatzin noticed it.

"Have you ever seen it," he asked.

"What?" asked Xuchitl with a quivering voice.

"The heart of jade."

"Which?"

"Our grandfather's." Then, realising his rashness, for he had exposed himself either to lie to Xuchitl or to reveal what he had seen in her father's room, which he felt was most dangerous for him to do, he added quickly, "Let us read on."

She did not perceive his confusion, and as she was trained to obey any masculine voice with enough authority to speak definitely to her, she read on: "But Azcalxuchitl had a husband and King Fasting-Dog

returned to his capital, disconsolate. The army was then getting ready for the war against Tlaxcala, and the king thought of a stratagem. He gave Cuacuauhtzin the command of the army and arranged with two of his captains that the commander should be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy. Cuacuauhtzin guessed it all as soon as he heard of his appointment, which he had no reason to expect, and, realising that it was best to leave the field to the king, he let himself be caught and was sacrificed by the Tlaxcalans."

Xuchitl was indignant. "He should not have done that !"

Ixcawatzin was not of her opinion. "If an ordinary man had done a similar thing, the king would have had to punish him. But since the king had to get married for the sake of the people, and his only choice was married already, he acted wisely."

Xuchitl was too angry to discuss. She read on : "Azcalxuchitl gave a son to the king. His name was Tetzauh Pilli. But the king's favourite concubine hated the prince and she managed to steal the heart of jade and to hide it in the prince's bedroom, where the king found it after a long search. At his request, the Emperor of Mexico and the King of Tlacopan examined the case and, no doubt deceived by the king's concubine, sentenced the prince to death : they came to visit him in his palace and, under the pretext of throwing a garland of roses around his neck, strangled him."

"I suppose," said Xuchitl, interrupting her reading, "that you think that right also."

"The concubine was wrong, but the two royal judges were right." Ixcawatzin spoke dogmatically. "The prince was unfortunate. It looks as if that stone were unlucky. I wonder what became of it. Read on."

"Queen Azcalxuchitl gave King Nezawal Coyotl another son. His name is Nezawal Pilli. He is the present king. When his father died, he was seven years old."

"That is all," said Xuchitl, disappointed.

"That is all," repeated Ixcawatzin, not so disappointed, for he remembered the heart of jade bleeding on Nezawal Pilli's breast.

This discovery though somewhat disappointing, added a fresh impetus to Xuchitl's curiosity about the ghost and the heart of jade, a curiosity dormant in her soul under layers of fear. She could not make out what connection there was—if any—between the heart of jade given by Huitzilihuitl the sorcerer to her grandfather King

Nezawal Coyotl or Fasting-Dog, and the heart of jade for which the ghost was yearning in the night ; but she had made up her mind that the way from the one to the other went through her father. This thought increased the distance she felt between her and her father, particularly since she had found him so ready to yield to popular beliefs in the matter of little Sparrow. But now she guessed that there was a dark side to her father's life, about which she knew nothing.

She was again thrown back on to the ghost. Would she take Citlali into her confidence ? She realised she would need her in many ways, but she felt that Citlali did not belong to the same plane on which the game was being played. Had she known our modern parlance, she would have said that Citlali was not conscious enough. One thing Citlali could do : she could tell her the story of the Wanton-Queen. But Xuchitl was tired of Citlali's constant negatives to her requests for the story and she thought that this time she ought to arrange matters so as to force her to unburthen it. The upshot of all these meditations was always the same : it was imperative that she should—unaided—seek as much information as she could about that ghost.

Xuchitl set out most methodically to fulfil this task by a detailed study of the palace and of the actual emplacement of the haunted apartments. The palace, at the same time a princely dwelling, a court of justice, a ministerial building and a granary, as well as a harem for two thousand women, and a zoo, was a world in itself, huge and labyrinthic, with numerous wings, inner gardens and courtyards. From her inspections and reconnaissance expeditions, Xuchitl gathered that the haunted apartments had or should have windows and doors opening out on two courts. She tried many ways to penetrate into one or other of these courts ; the one closer to her own apartments was, however, barred ; after considerable difficulty, she gained access to the other court, but only to find that the Wanton-Queen's apartments had no windows over it. Her first campaign, therefore, had led to a deadlock.

She concluded that the haunted apartments had windows on to the barred court and that therefore, these windows faced her own side of the building. Her apartments did not share that court but abutted on a corner of it. A flight of steps, however, which she had never explored, led, she found, to a suite of rooms which ran parallel to the haunted apartments and she concluded that this suite of rooms would be an excellent base for her operations. After careful soundings, for she must not give away her plans nor even raise suspicions about them, she found that no one cared whether she went upstairs or not, and that the rooms in question had been spacious, stately halls now marred by a huge linen-store which blocked out all the windows opening out

on to the court. These windows faced those which she assumed the Wanton-Queen's apartments were bound to have just opposite. She was definitely pleased with this discovery.

She turned her attention to linen. She explained to Citlali that she wanted to prepare her own linen for the day of her marriage which could not be far off. Citlali thought the idea excellent and declared herself ready to collaborate. Sheets, covers, napkins, huipils and cuetls were set aside from the loveliest collections of past queens and princesses and new orders placed with the best weavers and embroiderers of the land. Xuchitl then gave orders that all the linen in the cupboards should be removed for her own to be kept there, and began to spend longer and longer hours putting her linen treasure in order, classifying it, moving and removing it, until it was recognised by all her household as one of her favourite and matter-of-course occupations.

These tactics enabled her to explore the cupboards searchingly. She assumed that the blocked-out windows faced those which opened out towards the street. The cupboards were big enough for grown-up persons to sleep in them—about four feet deep and fully twelve feet high, divided into three or four compartments. Xuchitl spent much of her time inside them, sewing or embroidering, when in danger of being watched, exploring or . . . working, when in safer circumstances. She was trying to cut a slit into one of the thick planks which blocked a window. It took her long days of patient work. But she was richly rewarded by a double satisfaction: the window was actually there, and, what was even more to the point, there was a window opposite.

She could hardly rest with excitement for the remainder of the day. The slit, made with an obsidian knife which she was afraid of handling too freely, was too narrow and the wood too thick for her to see more than a thin band of the opposite side. Xuchitl spent hours that afternoon trying to spy out any signs of life along the ribbon of mystery grudgingly granted her by fate. At one time it seemed to her that she saw a shadowy form passing to and fro across her field of vision, but she had to come down with her neck aching, after covering the slit with heavy loads of cotton covers. Her curiosity had been but whetted by the scanty food it had secured.

3

The slave who came to do the rooms that morning was a different one. She had swung to the other end of the scale of ages. Xuchitl was

used to an old woman, white-haired and toothless, with a bald patch on the crown of the head which had saved her several times from the funeral pyre. That morning, the henequen-duster and the maguey-broom were handled by a girl of about her age. Xuchitl eyed her with a discreet curiosity, using all kinds of tricks to study her face. She was struck by the slave's mien. It was strangely dignified and even proud. There was a self-assurance in the upright gesture of her neck and head as if, though in slavery, she could carry herself high by some kind of birthright. She swept the floor with haughtiness, as if the dust were a host of enemies from which she was freeing the country, and when her hand passed the wet cloth over wooden frames and metal bars, it was not soft and caressing, as that of her old predecessor used to be, but warning and commanding, as if it conveyed to wood and metal secret instructions not to be disobeyed.

Xuchitl noticed all these shades with her keen insight into human facts, while trying to observe the face of her new servant. It was a curious face, built on a bold framework of bony features, strongly brought out by a total absence of muscle and fat. The forehead was narrow and the edges of the temporal bones so sharp that they looked as if they would cut through the dark, yellow skin; between the prominent, high cheekbones and the jaw-bones, a hollow ran across the face from ear to ear, and although she kept her mouth shut in a gesture of obstinacy or resentment, so set that it might date from previous generations, one could guess that she had big, strong teeth, and particularly eye-teeth, of a ferocious character. Her eyes were very black and Xuchitl noticed that her eye-balls were blood-shot. Altogether a striking face, not devoid of a forbidding beauty.

Xuchitl was impressed by her new slave, in fact perhaps repressed. She did not like the feeling and felt bound to react against it. Yet she found some difficulty in summoning up enough authority to ask her a question: "What is your name?" she said at last. The slave did not turn away from her work, and in a quiet, firm and colourless voice, answered: "Maxtla." Xuchitl was puzzled, for such a name, short for *maxtlatl*, meant loin-cloth, a garment used only by men, and therefore, when given as a personal name, reserved for the masculine sex. That a girl should be called Maxtla struck her as extremely odd.

While she wondered over the name and the slave, Maxtla vanished silently. Presently, left alone, she made up her mind to inquire from Citlali about this new person who intrigued her so much. She had a vague notion that there had been a monarch known as Maxtla. Where did he reign and when? She thought he had been an enemy of her grandfather Nezawal Coyotl. Perhaps this young girl came from that king or emperor or whatever he was. It was no use asking

Citlali about that, for she would not know. But possibly Ixcawatzin, or even her father, if only he would speak. She felt hungry. There were some maize cakes in a cupboard in her dining-room. She helped herself to one, went to the window and stood there watching the sun-patched street, the naked urchins, now and then a proud warrior with his hair tied high on the crown of the head, or a humble priest, bleeding at the ears, carrying his tobacco pouch on his back and his wooden incense ladler in his left hand.

"What, Xuchitl!" cried out Citlali as she entered the room. "Eating on your feet?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Don't play with your fate. Don't you know that if you eat standing you are sure to be taken away some day from your country into far-off lands?"

"That does not frighten me!" answered Xuchitl with an assurance which struck Citlali as somewhat callous. Noticing it perhaps, she added, "You would come with me, of course, wouldn't you? Look. Take some of this cake with me. No. Don't sit down. Eat it standing, so that we are taken away together. Who knows? You might meet Long Face somewhere far away."

"Oh me! He is gone to the dark regions."

"How do you know? Do you ever dream of him?"

"Sometimes," answered Citlali with simplicity.

"Who is Maxtla?" suddenly asked Xuchitl, changing the conversation so rapidly that Citlali was surprised.

As soon as she uttered the name, Xuchitl remembered the dramatic scene which she had read with Ixcawatzin. The defeat of the treacherous King Maxtla by the three allies of the lagoon led by her grandfather Nezawal Coyotl, the slaying of Maxtla, and his heart raised to the heavens by Nezawal Coyotl's avenging hand . . . Citlali was asking: "Has she been here this morning?"

"Yes. Is she to remain in my service? Who is she?"

"She is a daughter of Maxtla, the . . . one of the men the Wanton-Queen . . . it is a long story!" She broke off.

"But Citlali, when are you going to tell it me?"

"You are too young yet. Some day."

Xuchitl meditated over her discovery and how best to use it. It was imperative, she thought, first to cut out a square big enough for good observation; then to ensure ample leisure at the best time for

action. She had no doubt whatever that the best time was at night, since the object to be observed was a ghost. "Citlali," she said, "I am now over twelve. I want to sleep by myself in my own rooms."

Citlali was always smooth-humoured and, though she neither expected nor liked the suggestion, quietly answered, "Very well. We shall put the matter to the king."

Xuchitl felt a quick negative bubbling up from her hot heart; but she mastered it. It was dangerous both that her father should meddle with her plan and that she should appear to object to have her father informed of it. "The king is too busy for these trifles," she threw in unconcernedly, "We owe it to him to solve our problems ourselves."

She won Citlali over to her well thought-out plan. Citlali was to keep the rooms in which they slept at the time, and she herself would settle in the rooms to the south, which had the advantage that they controlled the access to the top floor.

She carried on the negotiations with consummate skill and only betrayed her impatience after her victory, when she forced Citlali to effect the removal that very night. During the evening, however, she realised her mistake, and lest she had raised any suspicions she decided to remain in her bed for a few nights, until Citlali forgot all about the change. "After all," she thought, "until I have opened a square in the wood I shall not be able to see anything."

Her next task was to gather adequate tools. This she did patiently by "borrowing" from the palace workshops. A few weeks after her first success, she had at last cut out her square opening so neatly that she could replace the plank on the gap without difficulty. It was dusk and she was tired out by her exertions, when she was at last able to cast eyes on the opposite side of the court. Her heart sank in her breast. There were four big door-windows opening out on to the gutter-path and the parapet which surmounted the cloister of the yard. Three of these windows were closed with wooden shutters; one, not that opposite hers but the next on the left, was open. Then she realised the mistake she had made in the choice of her own window. She ought to have opened her observation post in one of the two middle-windows, so as to command a better view. But she had worked at the first, which gave her a good view of only one window opposite and a fair view of one other. Suddenly, as her eyes were glued to the only window which was open, she saw the ghost.

She was a woman, small and neat, her hair down to the waist. Xuchitl saw her passing towards the far-off side of the rooms, so that she could not see her face. Her gait was light and jerky, as Xuchitl expected a ghost's gait to be. She disappeared as suddenly as she had appeared, leaving Xuchitl panting with curiosity, waiting for the

ghost to return. But night fell and Xuchitl, afraid of being missed, left her observation post, unsatisfied.

She was lucky that night. Citlali had a headache and a sorcerer had given her a sleeping drug. Xuchitl waited for the drug to operate and as soon as Citlali was asleep, rushed upstairs. She opened her window over ghostland, and was both happy and frightened to find that the window opposite her was wide open. The night was starry but dark. She could see nothing whatever in the haunted room. The window was a black square. That was all. Xuchitl was determined not to be disappointed. She conceived an audacious plan : to squeeze through the square and to walk round the edge of the wall. She glanced round and confirmed the observation she had previously made : there was a parapet all the way round. The path was narrow but she was thin. She passed her head out and for a long while studied the path, its distance to her hole in the plank and the best way to let herself down. While thus engaged, she was aware of a glow of yellow light which suddenly lit up the dark space around her. She looked up and gasped with astonishment : a torch had been brought into the haunted room, for the scene was lit up by its quivering light. But what a scene !

Under the lurid light of the torch, a man was sitting with terrifying immobility, his eyes glaring at her—or so she thought. There was some distance between this awe-inspiring vision and the window, possibly the whole width of the haunted hall, so that he must have sat with his back close to the wall. Xuchitl could not bear the sight. She was frightened and she ducked inside the cupboard for fear of being spotted by the vision. She felt terribly near it.

The cupboard was dark and, she found, full of fear too ; and after all, if she did not keep her eye on the vision, how could she know whether it was still sitting there or had moved towards her. This thought made her rush back to her secret window. She was relatively relieved to find the man still there, though still in exactly the same terrifying, uncompromising, fiendish attitude, with his eyes glaring at her. She resolved not to be cowed by him. After all, he was a mere man and not a ghost, or else he would be moving about instead of remaining there motionless, as if he were a god or a statue. . . . This idea set her thinking in a different direction. Why, suppose he, or it, were a statue ? Why not ? She kept her eyes fixed on the figure till they ached. She could not make up her mind. The light from the torch quavered on his face and it was difficult to tell whether it was he who moved or the shadows and spurts of light from the torch which made him look as if he were on the point of speaking to her. " But I *must* find out," she said to herself, determined to win over the mystery. In the end, she made up her mind that it was a statue painted to look like a man.

This emboldened her to carry out her audacious plan. She stripped, for her white huipil might be easily seen, while her swarthy skin would more readily melt into the general darkness ; and she let herself out through the square hole, not without several bruises and scratches. She found herself standing between the wooden back of the cupboard and the stone parapet of the courtyard. The parapet came up to her chin. She stood motionless, for a moment, partly to get used to the climate of her adventure, partly to make sure that the statue was a statue. She was so fascinated by the motionless man who glared at her unremittingly without moving even a little finger (his hands were lying dead on his knees) that it was sometime before she realised there was another window open—the third on the left. The light of the torch emanated from the extreme right, that is, from where she assumed the door to be, that very door behind which she had heard the ghost wailing for the heart of jade. Only flickering reflections at irregular intervals reached across the long hall as far as that third window on the left. These flickering reflections danced capriciously in the dark, but Xuchitl noticed a curious steadiness in one particular mass of darkness which they seemed somehow to carve out of the rest. She kept this corner of her field of vision under constant observation till suddenly one of these explosive spurts which pine torches are apt to emit, gave her a lightning view of the scene : another man was sitting there in very much the same position as the first.

She now was sure that both were statues, though she had not reasoned why. Their immobility, their likeness, but mostly the fact that the second figure had not budged when the light in the room had changed so unexpectedly, were undoubtedly the factors which helped her to make up her mind. As if this final award of her judgment was all she had been waiting for, Xuchitl began to move at once round the path towards the opposite side of the court.

The side of the court which separated her apartments from those of the ghost was shorter, the court was not a square but a quadrangle twice as long as it was wide. There were no openings in the wall of the second story over the court, which Xuchitl figured out as belonging to a corridor joining her own apartments and those of the King. She was then walking stealthily along outside that corridor, on top of the court ground-floor gallery, measuring every step, on the lookout for possible holes or lizards underfoot or for any happenings in the haunted rooms. When she came within a few steps of the second corner, before turning round to the path just outside the ghost's windows, she crouched and advanced on all fours. Her heart was beating so hard, she thought the ghost might hear it—or even those statues : . . She peeped round the corner : her eyes could now enfilade a long stretch of the hall, and in particular, of the opposite wall of it ;

she stayed there like a cat, watching, drinking in the weird sight with her astonished eyes. The dancing light of the torch lit up a row of sitting statues, all in an identical attitude, with their straight backs to the wall, their hands on their knees, their faces set rigid and hard, their eyes glaring at the wall or the window in front of them. All were youthful men, naked but for their loin-cloths; and all seemed to be made of some soft and shiny substance, like wax. Their eyes were of stone: jasper, turquoise and even, she thought, chalchihuitl or jade.

She was interested, puzzled, intrigued, but mightily relieved, indeed so relieved that she plucked up courage to crawl quickly across the open window to the other side, for she was curious to know the inside of the entrance door, the spot from which the ghost was wailing when she had heard her unforgettable voice. She crouched down into the narrow path—almost a gutter—and lo! two men again, but no, this time they were no statues: they stood defiantly to the right and to the left of the door. The one on the right was almost beyond her purview; but she could observe at leisure the one on the left. His skin—no wax this time, but real human skin—was shining with its true colours under the torch which he was holding with a firm grip. He was a handsome youth, of high rank, to judge by the cut of his hair, the feathers hanging from it behind his back and the feather ornament which covered his upper lip with a kind of artificial moustache hanging from a stone worn across a hole in the nose partition. His military bearing was perfect, for he did not budge. Indeed . . . she began to doubt again. So motionless . . . but his feet, his toenails, the scar on his knee . . . all the same, he did not even breathe . . .

A long, deep moan—the ghost's own voice! She knew it well. It shook her out of her observational mood, seized by a sudden panic, she crawled back without daring to look behind. On the way home a terrible fear seized her lest the linen inside the cupboard had fallen and blocked her out. She ran faster, arrived in front of her hole and crawled into the cupboard. Then she felt safe enough to glance back at ghostland. The torch had gone and utter darkness had again fallen on the haunted hall. Xuchitl looked stubbornly at the darkness, trying to pierce its mystery. She thought she saw the ghost pass back from the door towards the left. At least she heard a soft, suppressed moan. Her hands were bleeding and dirty. She dared not touch the linen with them. She set the square panel back on the hole and, trusting to luck, tiptoed downstairs to bed.

She fell asleep at once, but found no rest, for her sleep-world was as agitated and dramatic as her night adventures had been. A terrifying man now sat looking at her with glaring, tireless eyes, now marched

towards her with a deliberate step which she felt nothing could stop, holding a firebrand in his hand. His eyes were black and bloodshot. He was wearing a feather-crest, hanging from his hair, which was tied up to the top of the head in the manner of warriors. His high cheek-bones and his jaws were set and, under his thin lips, Xuchitl could guess his eye-teeth, truly formidable weapons. She ran backwards. "Maxtla ! Maxtla !" she cried, and she woke up wondering why she had called the fierce warrior who guarded the ghost's door by her slave's name.

5

Ixcawatzin called on the Chief Priest of the Calmecac. He was determined to make a clean breast of the feelings which had troubled him of late with regard to Xuchitl.

"Father," he said as he squatted at his feet, "the fact is that I am not at ease when I am close to her. I began to be aware that she was a woman when I saw her huipil hang no longer flat and loose over her chest, but held away from her body by her budding breasts."

"That is only natural," answered the old man. He was wrinkled and covered with sacrificial scars, and he reeked with a nauseating mixture of odours held by the Aztecs as the odour of sanctity: copal-incense, tobacco and putrified human blood. He looked at the contrite youth with his small, slit eyes. "What do you propose about it?"

"To give up my duties as her teacher."

The old priest smiled sardonically. "Oh no ! That is not the way. The less you see of her, the more you will think of her. No. Soldiers do not win victories by running away from the enemy."

"What must I do then?" humbly asked Ixcawatzin.

"Go every night to the woods and sacrifice as usual."

"I have never ceased to do so."

"Well then, if usual means do not suffice, you will have to apply severer ones."

"I am ready for anything which will make me the master of my body," said Ixcawatzin with his eyes firmly set.

"Very well," concluded the old priest. "Take a bone bodkin—maguey-thorns are not strong enough for that—and pierce . . . your sin right through. Then pass through the hole a length of maguey-string. You can make it as long as you desire. The string will win in the end. And now, go. It is time for evening prayers."

6

When Xuchitl and Ixcawatzin met for their next lesson, both were feeling tired and both looked worn. Xuchitl bore the traces of her night of feverish dreams. Ixcawatzin had come to his task after inflicting on himself the cruel sacrifice prescribed by his confessor, and he bore the traces of the suffering on his face. Pupil and teacher observed each other's condition, but there was no place for remarks on one's appearance in Aztec courtesy; and so far as Ixcawatzin was concerned, Xuchitl was used to his ascetic ways. Ixcawatzin wondered what was the matter with his student and reflected that it was high time she were married, for, though she might be unable to be a wife for a couple of years yet, it would settle her mind and, moreover, he thought, he would get rid of the constant temptation of her presence.

"Let us now read the wars between Tetzcuco and Azcalpotzalco," he said with a voice which Xuchitl felt thinner by all the energy which he had lost in sacrifice. Xuchitl opened the book and pulled the wooden cover towards the left of the table, standing in front of it, while Ixcawatzin sat down with visible relief.

"There!" he said, as the pictures of King Nezawal Coyotl and his two sons passed under his eyes.

Xuchitl carefully let the rest of the brightly coloured cloth find its own folds, and sat by his side. He drew away ever so slightly. "Are you afraid of me?" The words came to the tip of her tongue for she was mischievous, but went no further, for she was cautious too and she knew that such a remark was much too far out of the bounds of Aztec manners to be tolerated by Citlali or even understood by Ixcawatzin. She turned her attention to the book and began to read.

"Nezawal Coyotl had many sons. Two of them, Moxiuhlacuitzin and Xochiquetzalzin went to hunt the tiger and the lion on the hills. As they were not used to the winding ways of that strange land, they strayed into the territories of King Maxtla, their father's enemy, whose soldiers, sure of their king's reward, rounded them up and brought them to King Maxtla. 'Here, sir,' they said, 'we have caught two tiger cubs on the hill.' Maxtla smiled between his long eye-teeth and said, 'Have them stuffed for my dancing hall.' The two princes were strangled (so as not to tear their skin) and King Maxtla had them embalmed. They stood to the right . . . and . . ."

Xuchitl was silent but her eyes read on: ". . . and to the left of the main door of his dancing hall, holding slices of *ocotl* which burnt there all the night lighting the room."

"Yes?" asked Ixcawatzin. "Can't you interpret the pictures?"

"Yes!" answered Xuchitl under her breath. Ixcawatzin thought she was moved by the gruesomeness of the story. "You must take facts as they come and never forget that you are the daughter of a king."

"Y . . . Yes," said Xuchitl, seeing again the figure she had seen standing by the Wanton-Queen's door, also holding a light in his dead hand, that figure which had made her cry "Maxtla! Maxtla!" in the night. She glanced imploringly at Citlali, who, placid and indifferent, was sewing on the mat. Had she not said that the little slave was the daughter of a Maxtlatzin? Wouldn't this Maxtlatzin be the son of that King Maxtla? Was this a vengeance, and if so whose but her own father's? Ixcawatzin waited for her to recover. She could not read on.

"I have not slept well. My eyes are tired," she explained. He felt so exhausted himself that he went away, relieved.

7

As soon as he had gone Xuchitl, unable to restrain her impatience, asked Citlali to relate the story of the Wanton-Queen to her there and then. In order to forestall Citlali's usual dodges, she added: "I must have it now because I have seen some things already . . ."

"Seen what?" asked Citlali somewhat alarmed.

"Well, for instance, the row of statues on the wall."

She answered with this concrete fact in the hope that it might have something to do with the story. It evidently had, for Citlali, thoroughly alarmed, asked, "And how did you——?"

Xuchitl realised that she had given herself away, but beat a clever retreat: "I have seen them in one of the books, I mean."

Citlali was very much relieved. She was wondering whether she ought to speak yet and eyed Xuchitl hesitatingly. She was longing to tell her the story and at bottom was pausing just to find some reason for doing so. "After all," she said, "you will get married soon yourself and then you might find this tale most profitable." Thus at ease with herself, she made Xuchitl lie down by her side and, without ceasing to sew, she began to unroll her narrative.

"A few years before your birth, it must have been the year 2-Rabbits, or perhaps the year 1-Houses, the Mexicans sent a present of lovely girls to your father. The loveliest of them was a daughter of Emperor Axayacatl——"

"A sister of Moteczuma, then?"

"That is so. She was very young, about your age or younger still, and very beautiful. At her birth, the priest-astrologer saw strange things in the stars about her. He saw that she would live a life of complete devotion to the goddess of carnal love and that the possession she would prize most would be her *nenel*——"

"What is that?" asked Xuchitl. Citlali smiled. "My little precious feather, don't you know what *nenel* means? You have a nice little one yourself, and your husband will soon find it for you!"

"Ah!" sighed Xuchitl.

"Yes. This girl was to be a keen enjoyer of herself, so the priest-astrologer called her Chalchiuitnenetl or Womb-of-Jade. He must have been a far-sighted priest. When Womb-of-Jade came here she brought with her a host of servants, nearly two thousand; and a steward named Cualqui and a captain of her guard named Loin-Cloth."

"Maxtla!" Xuchitl cried out.

"Yes. Loin-Cloth. The father, by the way, of our little Maxtla who does your room every morning."

"Tell me, Citlali, do you know whether this captain Loin-Cloth you mention was the son of a king Loin-Cloth who fought against my grandfather?" Xuchitl was passionately pursuing her clue, thinking of the embalmed torch bearer she had seen in the haunted hall.

"Yes, he was. No, he wasn't. He was his grandson, I believe. Anyhow, he came straight from that king. That, I know. He had been brought up in Mexico, lest Nezawal Pilli had him put to death. But no man can dodge his star. These two men, Cualqui and Maxtla, did the girl-queen in. You see, your father found her too young and he was at the time too much interested in the Lady of Tula, anyhow. It was then he built that lovely house for the Lady of Tula to live in by herself apart from his other women. So poor little Womb-of-Jade was rather neglected and as in any case she was inclined that way by birth, she became passionately fond of the lord Loin-Cloth. Of course she was a bit too young for him also, but I suspect that he was the first to enjoy her, and very enjoyable she was, they all say, for he said so himself at his death when he said to the king: 'Sir, I die but it was worth it.' I expect I am running on too fast. She seemed to like it also very much indeed, all too much, for, not content with Maxtla, she secretly became the darling of two other young bloods, Five-Snakes and Humming-Bird, and a good trio of debauchees they made, with Cualqui the steward as go-between. You should have seen the orgies and the dancing and the *teometl* and the rest. But fast as they were the girl proved the fastest of the lot and developed such an appetite that she would insist on enjoying any young man she took a fancy to;

then to avoid risks, lest one of them should give her away, she had them killed."

"Oh," exclaimed Xuchitl, horrified.

"You wait," Citlali went on. "She had a good clay and wax modeller amongst her slaves. She made him model the portrait of the young men. When the portrait was finished, she satisfied her lust. And then Cualqui or Loin-Cloth, or Five-Snakes or Humming-Bird dispatched the youth to the dark regions quietly and the statue was brought to her hall and gorgeously adorned with jewels."

"So that is why there are so many statues in her hall!" Xuchitl burst forth.

"How do you know?" asked Citlali. Xuchitl was taken aback by her own imprudence.

"I saw it in my books," she explained.

"How many were they?" asked Citlali.

"I . . . I don't remember . . ."

"It is a pity. No one knows how many they were. Some say twelve; some say one hundred. Your father is the only person who could tell."

"How did he find out?"

"He used to visit Womb-of-Jade now and then, at first very seldom, but as she grew to womanhood, a little oftener. He saw one more statue every time he came. 'Who are those people?' he asked her, and she answered they were her familiar gods. It seems that the King had a magic stone which made people who wore it enjoy lust much more keenly and——"

"What stone was that, do you know?" asked Xuchitl, tense with excitement.

"Do you remember that night," asked Citlali, "when we heard the ghost asking for it?"

"The heart of jade!" whispered Xuchitl, trembling with emotion.

"Yes. It was a heart carved in a lovely chalchiwitl. The Wanton Queen knew about it through captain Maxtla. She cajoled the king into letting her wear it for a night. I don't know why your father let her have it. That is a point which has always puzzled me in the story, for the King was not yet interested in her as a woman, although he was beginning to be, I believe. Unless . . . it never occurred to me before"—she was thinking aloud in the midst of her narrative. With a thread between her teeth and a needle between her fingers, she remained silent for a while. "I wonder, perhaps he was beginning to suspect something and, seeing her insistence on the heart of jade, he let it go as a bait. Anyhow he let her have it. A few days later, the King came across Captain Maxtla in a hall of the palace. The young man tried to avoid him, but your father walked straight at him, for his eye—you

know your father's eye: nothing escapes him—his eye had caught sight of a gold chain round Maxtla's neck which awoke his suspicions. The end of the chain was hidden under the young man's mantle. The King talked amiably to him while studying the chain and came to the conclusion that Captain Maxtla was wearing the heart of jade. He said nothing and they parted on excellent terms. That night your father came unexpectedly to visit his girl-queen very late. He was stopped at the door, that door where we heard the wail that night . . ." (As Citlali spoke Xuchitl said to herself: The door at which Captain Maxtla now stands as a torch-bearer . . .) ". . . brushed aside all resistance and walked straight through a double row of statues to Womb-of-Jade's bedroom. There was an incense-burner in a corner, burning with a faint flame. By its light, the King could see his wife asleep in bed. He was pleased. You know, he was beginning to be interested in her. He knelt down by the bedside and softly uncovered her. She did not budge. After a little while, the King was struck by her utter immobility. He could not see her face. He sought her mouth with his hand. There was no breath. He seized her face hard. It was wooden. The figure was a statue. He sprang to his feet, rushed into the next room where he saw two or three figures crawling hurriedly away into the inner rooms, penetrated into the darkness beyond and at last found a torch which he grasped in his hand. Everywhere in the queen's huge apartments people went about frantically, running away from him. After halls and halls of emptiness and panic, he drew aside a heavy curtain and saw the queen, stark naked, dancing on a table covered with food and drink and acayetls still alight, making the air blue with tobacco smoke, while Five-Snakes, Maxtla and Humming-Bird, drunk with teometl, laughed and beat the table with their knives."

Citlali said no more.

"What happened then?" asked Xuchitl.

"Oh, you may imagine. They were all brought before the Courts and executed."

"The queen also?"

"Of course. The chief culprit, after all. She was strangled in the public square. I saw it done. And her body was burnt."

"And Maxtla's body? Was it burnt also?"

"That, I don't know. I don't remember," answered Citlali.

"And where does *our* Maxtla come in, our servant I mean?"

"She was a daughter . . . I forgot to tell you. Loin-Cloth was married and had a daughter. But when Womb-of-Jade became interested in him, she had his wife drowned in the lake. We all thought it an accident at the time. This little girl became your father's slave on her own father's conviction and death."

Xuchitl was sunk in meditation. It was evident that, for some reason unknown to Citlali, the King had decided to leave the scene of the Wanton-Queen's crimes intact and even to improve upon it by bestowing a kind of posthumous life on two of her chief accomplices. The ghost held the key to that mystery.

8

That very night, towards midnight, trusting to luck, for Citlali had taken no sleeping drugs, Xuchitl resumed her seat at her observation post. Would the ghost haunt her one-time earthly abode that night? Her feelings on the matter were mixed. Her curiosity hoped the ghost would come. Her fears hoped otherwise. How did one behave towards a ghost? Could one resist? Would the ghost drag her away for good? Thus went her busy brain while her eyes took stock of the situation. The moon was rising behind, to the left of her, above the edge of her own roof, and its pale blue light bathed the front of the ghost's wing and cast patches of cold light on the hall of statues through the four open windows. No trace of the ghost. No artificial light.

She waited for a long while. But as nothing happened, she stripped, squeezed through the hole in the wood and crawled round the two corners along the gutter path. As she turned the second corner, she saw the ghost. The phantom-queen was standing by the fourth window, at the other end of the court, clad in a long huipil, barefoot, her black hair hanging to the waist; instead of eyes, two enormous black holes, which came down to the middle of her cheeks. Xuchitl was so fascinated that she felt less frightened than she thought she would have been. The ghost was looking at the moonlit sky, motionless. Xuchitl's hands were leaning heavily on hard, sandy stone, which drove its crystals into her skin. She looked down for a better surface. When she looked up again, the ghost had vanished.

Xuchitl waited patiently for it to come back. Her hands and knees were aching and her heart was burning with impatience; But nothing happened, save that now and then she seemed to hear curious sounds, coming from the right, just from the spot where Maxtla stood erect by the door, or so she reckoned. They were like whispers, murmurs of a caressing kind. At last, unable to stand the spur of her curiosity, she summoned her courage and scurried to the other side of the window, then softly turned round and peeped over the edge.

The ghost was holding Maxtla's rigid body in her arms, closely, so closely that body and ghost were but one figure. Her face was

resting on his chest, one of her arms round his neck, the other one on his shoulder. She had squeezed her waist between his waist and the rigid arm whose fist grasped an empty hole with as much energy as if the pine torch it was meant to hold had been inserted into it. Her legs were interlaced with his in such a way that Xuchitl thought it was a wonder they did not both fall to the ground. She was talking to him in a low, very low voice, words which fell on his dead ear while he glared at the void which had gaped for years in front of his dead eyes.

The ghost's own eyes were closed for a long while. She sighed a deep, deep sigh and opened them without moving. Her eyes now fell on the door (the inner panel of which was of burnished copper) and gradually grew wider and wider. She lifted her head, with her large eyes still fixed on the polished metal door, then with a feline leap, let Maxtla go, wheeled round on her left foot and faced little Xuchitl with a deep otherworldly cry : " Oh ! "

Her huipil had fallen off one of her shoulders, showing a full but firm breast, covered with bruises. Her forehead was narrow but high ; her lips full ; her cheeks hollow ; but nothing in that face counted but the eyes, two immense pools of black further enlarged by wide circles. She was slowly, slowly advancing towards Xuchitl, her deep eyes flooded with astonishment, unbelievable wonder, joy, striking terror into her visitor's heart. " You, precious little feather, little jade of my heart ! " Her voice was warm and slightly masculine. She embraced Xuchitl and Xuchitl had fainted on feeling the ghost's hands on her shoulder and the ghost's hot breath on her face.

She took the child in her arms and carried her without difficulty to a couch of tiger-skins which lay between two statues of her past lovers. She deposited her burden on the couch with exquisite tenderness, then lay by her side. She spoke to Xuchitl as if Xuchitl could hear.

" Oh my little feather, what a delight you are. You make me drunk with your aroma. Why do I like it so ? " She breathed in the aroma of Xuchitl's body which made her eager, sensitive nostrils quiver. " Ah, I know why ! You smell like him. You smell like my precious executioner. Darling jade of mine ! And you are a little woman, just as I was at your age. Nice breasts budding already ! " She caressed the girl's breasts and kissed them. " And who are you, I wonder, to come and see me in Hell ? " Xuchitl opened her eyes. The ghost smiled : " Frightened ? "

Xuchitl was beginning to wonder whether after all that person was a ghost. Her head lay on the stranger's arm. It was a substantial, muscular, in fact, a strong arm. That was not the way she had imagined a ghost to be. Now, the stranger's hand was passing warmly over her

body. "You are a nice thing. And so well made! But your scent, oh your scent! Who are you?" She struck her forehead: "The king's daughter, of course. I bet you are his daughter. Fruity-Nipple's?" Xuchitl said "yes" with her eyelids. The stranger took Xuchitl's little nipple in her fingers and said: "I bet yours will be as fruity as your mother's." Then suddenly: "And I, do you know who I am?" She did not wait for Xuchitl to speak. "I am Womb-of-Jade. Strange name, isn't it, my little feather? But true all the same. See. Look all round. All these men died to prove my name right. They all took death willingly to enjoy me. Don't you believe what they say," she admonished with an earnest smile, and Xuchitl noticed her teeth were sharp and so were her bloodstained nails. "I killed none of them. They killed themselves. Every one had the choice: either death and me or neither me nor death. I always let every one of them live long enough to advise the next." Xuchitl looked at her with eyes lost in wonder. "I know. I know. You want to ask: 'Why kill them at all?' Don't you believe what they say: that I killed them for fear of being found out, as if that were not bound to happen some day! No. I laid down that condition for other reasons..." and she grew dreamy and vague. "Which?" whispered Xuchitl with a curiosity that astonished her. "Which?" repeated the ghost, imitating Xuchitl's voice with a loving smile which twisted her long thin lips. "What a pretty voice you have! I will tell you. I did not want a man who had enjoyed me to enjoy any one else. And as for me, you have no idea of the joy of meeting a body which is burning its last in your honour. Oh"—she squeezed Xuchitl passionately—"oh, the joy! Nothing but death can give a taste to love. Death and lust." She grew dreamy again. Her eyes, like velvety skies, spread their wide glance over Xuchitl, while her left arm caressed the girl's body. "That is why he did not put me to death. He wanted to taste me as I came back from the funeral pyre—unscathed. He sentenced me and made me believe I was to be strangled. He dressed and masked my maid instead of me and had her strangled—and that night he came and . . . he was so sure of his pleasure that he wore the heart of jade!"

Xuchitl was trembling all over.

"Have you heard of the heart of jade?" asked Womb-of-Jade with her deep, warm voice. Her eyes grew dreamy again, but this time there was a streak of madness in them which brought back Xuchitl's worst fears. "A precious gem. He always brings it now when he comes to see me. He had neglected me for a few years, while he had . . ." She was going to say "Fruity-Nipple" but did not finish the sentence, and went on: "He cannot do without the Womb-of-Jade. And jade for jade, the womb is worth any heart, make no

mistake about that, my sweet little feather. All the same, I love the heart of jade. See." She stripped to the waist, uncovering her lovely, full, hard breasts which the moonlight modelled with inky shadows. "See. Here, and here, and here," she pointed with a sharp, long, bloodstained nail. "All bruises made by the heart of jade which he just presses against me, knowing how it hurts. I love it. But any of these men"—she showed the row of wax figures sitting against the wall—"give me as much pleasure when I am in a mood for it. As for Five-Snakes and Loin-Cloth there"—she pointed at the two torch bearers by the door—"they are alive whenever I wish. Or I am dead, I don't know for certain, no, that, I don't know. It is the . . . only . . . thing . . ."

She shook her head in a gesture of honest doubt which struck Xuchitl as comic. "You smile! How pretty you are!" She lay down by Xuchitl's side and pressed the girlish body against her own with a vigorous, nervous passion! "Oh, I wish I were a man. I would enjoy you now . . . I would teach you such things! . . ." She rose, resting on her elbow and cast her big black eyes on Xuchitl's pretty face. "Why aren't you a boy? Had you but been a boy, you would have remembered this night for ever . . ."

"You would have killed me!" said Xuchitl.

Her eyes flashed: "I never killed anybody. Who told you I killed these men? Ask them. Come . . . But no. You would never understand. Go. Go quick. I . . . I must be alone for a while. Five-Snakes is waiting." She grew confidential and whispered: "He is lovely. But moody, moody, you have no idea! You see yonder star? It is now just over the edge. When it is about"—she looked her up and down with her deep keen eyes—"about your height above the roof, it is then that Five-Snakes is at his best. That was always so, even before . . . it happened. So, I must get ready for him."

She was on her feet and offering her hand to Xuchitl: "Come. I will show you the way. I will not mention your visit to your father. He is mad. You know, of course, that he is mad. Only he hides it so well, so well, that no one has noticed it." She was leading Xuchitl to the door. "No," said Xuchitl, "let me go this way," and she moved towards the window. "Come again," said Womb-of-Jade and she ran indoors saying soothingly, "Yes, Five-Snakes. Coming, my precious stone, coming."

That night Xuchitl was unable to sleep. Her imagination was busy living again the vivid scenes which she had witnessed and lived in

Womb-of-Jade's apartments. Her mind was no less busy taking in the consequences which such scenes implied. What impressed her most was the light the whole thing shed on her father. There was a whole side to him—a kind of haunted, secret side to him—which her experiences of that last night had suddenly revealed to her. He, the wise and the just, had reprieved the adulterous queen behind a screen of justice in order to experience the quality of her lust. She did not sit in judgment over her father's action; she was trying to work out what it implied. She gathered that for a wise man such as her father was, there was a quality in tasted, lived life, which was to be sought beyond and above justice, provided the face of justice could be saved. That was her reading of it, anyhow. Her father remained the captain of the host of light. It was the meaning of light which changed. A man's brain was free to inquire and to relate things as they occurred and, as part of the process, to enter the Hell of mad lust and to see for himself what happened to him there.

The queen was mad. How could she live sane in the midst of the images of her dead lovers? She had a lust mania. Citlali had told her about women who were born that way and who sold themselves for next to nothing provided they could enjoy several men a day. But Xuchitl was struck by Womb-of-Jade's earnestness about lust. She was ready to die for lust and to make lust worth dying for. This gave Xuchitl a high opinion of lust, which the very thought of her own father, coming to meet the Wanton-Queen with his magic heart of jade in his trembling hands, was bound to enhance.

This seemed to her, on reflection, perfectly normal. Apparently, she thought, death was the test of all life worth living. Death in war tested power; death in lust tested lust. She was beginning to find a reason behind Ixcawatzin's irritating dogmatic conformism, and to wonder whether after all little Sparrow's death was not the test of the people's faith in Tlaloc. "But, of course," she thought, "the trouble is that I do not believe in Tlaloc." She caressed her body as Womb-of-Jade had done and wondered whether she believed in lust enough to die for it. "Of course, I cannot tell yet," she mused, "but I don't think I will." She thought it over: "It seems to me there must be something wrong somewhere about testing things by death, for it is like giving the whole of all there is for just one little bit of it, be it ever so precious, even a heart, or a womb, of jade."

Nezawal Pilli threw the aromatic acayetl which he was smoking into an incense burner, went to his closet, felt in the dark for the

heart of jade, hung it round his neck and went out of his study. The hall was empty and on its dark, polished floor, the pine torches which burnt here and there, raised waves of reddish light which looked like liquid fire. He walked lightly, noiselessly across that silent space—he was barefoot—till he reached the first of the three heavy curtains which separated the world from the door of the haunted apartments, and then, after seizing hold of a pine torch which stood in an elaborate copper stand by the curtain, he disappeared behind the heavy green cloth. Curtain after curtain did he pass, till at last he stood before the door. He opened it and, without looking, let the torch rest on the spot where he was used to find Maxtla's dead hand ready to grasp it. The torch fell to the ground, and his eyes beheld a strange sight. Queen Womb-of-Jade was lying on the floor, closely embracing Maxtla's body which had fallen on her. Before he knew what to do, the torch had set fire to the dry clothes, skin, hair and even inner part of Maxtla's body, and all was burning lustily. Nezawal Pilli endeavoured to disentangle the mad queen from the burning corpse, but the mad queen had never felt happier in her life: "No, no! Leave me!" she cried, hugging her burning lover tighter than ever. "At last, at last I shall possess you and you me! At last! At last! . . . At . . . last . . ." The flames had caught her hair and her huipil, and under Nezawal Pilli's fascinated eyes she gave her last sigh of lust, of life, of pain, all in one—without slackening the intimate embrace which united her to the image of her lover.

The king watched the two bodies burn for some time. The resins and odorous gums with which Maxtla's body had been embalmed fed the fire, which soon began to spread over the polished, dry floor. There were couches, each made up of many layers of cotton wraps, between every two statues in the hall. He covered the scarred bodies, still smouldering, with several layers of these wraps and threw over the whole two or three tiger-skins. Then, by some sort of posthumous dedication, he laid the heart of jade on the pile.

"There you are," he thought, "as you longed to be. Dead in lust. Are you any better for it? Unless that fleeting instant in which you enjoyed your longed-for combination of lust and death lives for ever in some world beyond my ken . . . Yet you deserve to feel the heart of jade pressing upon your ashes as it did so often upon your throbbing breasts. Farewell!"

He cast a last glance on the heap of wraps and skins which was slowly smothering the fire beneath it, and withdrew leaving on it the heart of jade.

II

A few days later Nezawal Pilli called together his sons and his daughter to impart to them the news of Xuchitl's betrothal to Moteczuma's brother Macuilmalinaltzin. While the royal family discussed the happy event, Firebird and Citlali whispered to each other outside on the mat.

"Do you know the news?" asked Firebird.

"Yes. Xuchitl is going to be married."

"I don't mean that. I mean about the ghost."

"What is she up to now?" asked Citlali in a whisper, with an uneasy glance towards the door where the ghost might appear at any time.

"Nothing. She is finished."

"What do you mean?" asked Citlali.

"Three-Reeds keeps it very quiet, but somehow or other, it has got out." The tutor leant over Citlali's ear: "The King has run her to earth. He got right into Maxtla's skin, to draw her out, and suddenly fell on her and burnt her alive."

"Alive? But a ghost is not alive."

"Anyhow, he burnt her for good and all. She won't come back now."

"This king," said Citlali after a silence, "he is unbeatable as a sorcerer. I believe there's never been a man who had a stronger way with ghosts. If he were not a king, he would have made a grand tonalpouhque." There was a silence. "Are you sure, though, about your story?"

"I have seen the hole burnt into the floor. I even found this."

"What is it?" asked Citlali without touching it.

"A feather. It was in Loin-Cloth's feather crest. You can have it."

"No!" said Citlali, and she drew away, feeling most uncomfortable.

12

When Xuchitl and Citlali arrived back in Xuchitl's apartments both looked pensive. The first to shake off her thoughts was Xuchitl. "You did not seem to mind the ghost this time? I noticed that you did not hurry me through, as you always used to do when we passed by the curtains." Citlali smiled. "There is no longer any ghost!"

"What!" Xuchitl cried out with a vivacity which startled Citlali.

"There is no longer any ghost. Your father has laid it low."

"What do you mean Citlali? How can you do that?"

"I couldn't, I'm sure." Citlali shook her head modestly. "But your father is no ordinary man. I am positive no ghost could resist him. . . . This one hasn't!"

"But how do you know? How did it happen?"

Citlali was too cautious, even with Xuchitl, to give Firebird away. She concentrated on the second question. "Your father got into Loin-Cloth's skin and drew her to him, then fell on to the ground with her and burnt her."

Xuchitl's imagination built up the whole scene as it had actually occurred by merely handling the materials which her memory provided. She had been struck by the unsteadiness of the group which Queen Womb-of-Jade made with Loin-Cloth's embalmed body when she held it in a close embrace, hanging on to it, both standing on a light wooden base. Xuchitl had felt at the time that the queen might fall on her back at any moment with Loin-Cloth on top of her. The torch could easily be explained in many ways. She was thus able to provide a rationalistic explanation of this exploit of sorcery attributed to her father. The upshot of it all was that Queen Womb-of-Jade was dead. She burst into tears, for she had begun to love her.

"What is the matter?" asked Citlali, "are you weeping for the ghost?"

She did not answer. Her grief came from a world to which Citlali had no access. Citlali could not, even on reflection, admit the possibility of the explanation which Xuchitl had discovered at once by the normal use of her memory and of her reason. She embraced the girl with tender affection: "How foolish of me. I forgot the other news. Never mind. You must be brave. They say Macuilmalinaltzin is by far the nicest prince of the Mexican house. Everybody loves him. They all wish he were emperor instead of his nasty brother."

Xuchitl was not sure of her own feelings on the matter of her marriage, and let Citlali speak and comfort her for the grief she did not feel, just to put her off the real grief she felt. Was she glad or sorry to go to Mexico? Glad for the sake of curiosity; sorry for the sake of liberty. She feared that life over there, in the Island City, would be ceremonious and hemmed in with a punctilious etiquette; and also that Moteczuma, who was a bigot, would force her to attend the bloodthirsty services of the worship which her father quietly allowed her to neglect. There was the curiosity of her body too, now wide awake, particularly since her unforgettable night with Womb-of-Jade. . . . How far off it seemed now! And deep down in her, there was the strange conviction that the whole thing was but a striking

episode preliminary to her real life and which her real life would entirely flood out, as the sun floods out the stars.

13

Listlessly Ixcawatzin picked up here and there the several objects which he needed for his worship and sacrifice in the woods: the conch-flute, the matting, the earthenware censer and the bag in which he carried his maguey-thorns, his incense powder and his fire-lighting implements. He left for the woods in a most dejected state of mind, absorbed in thought. So, Xuchitl was going to Mexico—Tenochtitlán, and to be married. What of it? He was a priest. He had nothing to do with women. Why should he care whether a young immature girl went here or there, got married or not? And who ever doubted that the daughter of the king of Tetzcuco would be married one day? All these excellent reasons, which he mentally recited to himself as he walked on, were powerless to dispel his gloom. Xuchitl was getting married and she was going to Tenochtitlán, and he was sad. That was the fact.

He walked and walked, trying to tire his sadness out or to reach the end of it, farther, always farther into the wood, till at last he let himself fall dispirited on the wild grass and, leaning on the trunk of a tree, gave himself a brief respite. He was too well trained to glide down into self-pity without a stout fight with himself. He sprang to his feet, filled the censer with copal grains and struggled with his wooden implements till he succeeded in making a fire. Then he began his prayers and, with his maguey-thorns, he pierced himself several times with an unusual savagery, as if his body were his enemy. He was standing all the while, afraid of squatting (the worshipful position) lest his body betrayed him and he fell asleep; for he was dead tired. And after a long time fighting with sleep, fighting with grief, bleeding himself, trying to pray, he suddenly broke into a loud outburst of tears and sobs and fell to the ground crying "Xuchitl! Xuchitl! Xuchitl!"

He moaned and moaned until he moaned himself to sleep. His fire, unattended, went out. The wind rose over the hills and began to agitate the world in which he slept, putting life and movement into it. The tree by which he had settled had been barked for masks, and there were half-detached bands of bark hanging from it which the wind caused to vibrate and beat against the trunk. Ixcawatzin dreamt that the peculiar fantasm whose chest opens and shuts with a hard noise was after him. He was a bold man. He would not run away. He ran towards the fantasm and in the traditional fashion, caught

hold of him. Ixcawatzin noticed that the fantasm's chest did clap its doors open and shut, but he also noticed when the doors were open, that the fantasm's heart was made of jade—green, shiny, with drops of blood trickling over it. He tried to catch hold of it, but failed. "Let me go, Ixcawatzin," said the fantasm. "I shall not let you go till you give me something," answered Ixcawatzin in the approved fashion. No less orthodox, the fantasm gave him a maguey-thorn. "That is not enough," objected Ixcawatzin, following the rules. The fantasm then gave him another one, but Ixcawatzin held him fast till, as was generally done, he had received four thorns. The last one the fantasm stuck hard on Ixcawatzin's hand and he suddenly vanished. Ixcawatzin woke up. He had four maguey-thorns in his hand, one stuck hard into his palm.

The dawn was beginning to lighten the sky. He collected his belongings, took his conch-flute and played himself home with a long, melancholy, disconsolate tune.

14

That night was also one of agitated dreams for Xuchitl. "You have no idea, Citlali. It was the strangest dream I ever had in my life. There was a canoe . . . No. It was not a canoe. It was much bigger and much deeper and wider and it had three or four benches across. And it fought with the waves, for it happened in the sea, and the waves rose as high as a house——"

"That is impossible," cut in Citlali dogmatically, with the limited experience of the lagoon to go upon.

"I tell you it was all so strange. And as the waves rose, they shone like many, many, many chalchiwits, green, lovely green; and the big canoe with its men, lots of them, went up to the top of the chalchiwits, where it was frothy and white, and then fell down to the bottom, and one or two of the men dropped out and the others shouted and looked out for them, but they had disappeared for good, and so on for such a long time that there were only two men left in the canoe. Then the sun struck one of them in the face, and I saw he was not like our men, but white, almost like cotton, and he had a thick long black beard; the other one I could not see. Then there was a strong gust of wind, and the canoe was smashed on the rocks and I saw the two bodies flung high in the air and thrown among the bushes behind the rocks. Then came the strangest thing of all. One of the men rose slowly and looked round. I can still see him as clearly as I am seeing you. He was the most beautiful man I ever saw. His face was white and slightly red and his hair was like gold."

Citlali burst into laughter. "He must have looked quite funny!"

"Don't laugh. You have not seen him. I tell you he was the most beautiful creature you ever saw. His eyes were the colour of the sky at noon. He had a long golden beard. He was strong and had big arms and legs."

"Had he a loin-cloth on?" asked Citlali.

"He had some kind of garment thick and black which covered all his body from the waist downwards. He looked around, fell on his knees, joined hands like this and glanced at the blue heavens. I guessed he was praying to his god. He then stood up. He was tall, ever so tall. He walked here and there, looking for something. It was for his comrade he was looking. He found him and as he stooped to look closely at him, I woke up."

"Strange!" said Citlali, at last impressed.

"No," answered Xuchitl, "I know what it is. My father has often told me. This means that Quetzalcoatl is coming back. I don't mind being married to Macuilmalinal. Before I am called upon to become his actual wife Quetzalcoatl will have arrived and saved me."

PART VI

THE CRIME OF ALONSO MANRIQUE

1

THE DECISION of his son to embrace a religious life was a severe blow for Don Rodrigo. Alonso was his only son and he could not bear the idea of having to leave Torremala to some distant cousin without roots in the land; he thought, moreover, that the youth was not experienced enough to take such an irrevocable step. But Alonso was determined to enter the monastery and he had the powerful support of his mother. "We shall see," she had said the day of the boy's birth, when Don Rodrigo had confidently asserted that he would make a knight of him. And "she had seen" that he became what she had always wished him to become, one of the elect who serve the Lord and spread His spirit among men.

At this juncture, however, Don Rodrigo found an ally where he least expected it. Father Guzmán was not at all convinced of the wisdom of Alonso's step. He thought the boy far too young to realise the import of the choice he was making, and he knew him too well to underestimate the pugnacious and adventurous strains in his make-up which, in spite of his temporary religious crisis, predestined him to a

knightly and military life. He said nothing on this aspect of the matter precisely because it was the most important in his eyes, and was content with skilfully negotiating an agreement on the basis of a long novitiate under his own personal supervision at Moor's Hill—a solution which Don Rodrigo accepted after the sagacious monk had assured him that he himself viewed it as purely temporary.

Don Rodrigo was busy at the time with the after-effects of the dramatic episode which had brought about Alonso's decision. He had to punish the Esquivels, father and daughter, for leniency might be interpreted as an avowal of lack of confidence in his own son's innocence ; yet, he felt reluctant to do so, not so much out of Christian charity as out of Visigothic contempt, while both his wife and his son begged him to be charitable. Finally he decided to have them exiled and saw to it that the family sold the stock and goodwill of Esquivel's business for a fair sum and were in a position to settle somewhere else. Then he turned his attention to Antonio. He had a foible for his breezy if somewhat coarse chief officer ; but this painful business had been the second one in a short time in which he had shown himself more impetuous and selfish than sensible. He told him so frankly, put it to him that it was better for all concerned if he went, as far away as possible, painted to him the wealth and comfort of the Indies in glowing colours, and offered him help so that he could sail with the next fleet to leave for the Antilles. Antonio, who was bored with Torremala, seized the opportunity with alacrity, and a few months after these dramatic events, he rode gaily to Sanlúcar on a fine horse, a present from Don Rodrigo, to sail to the New World, where women could be had for the asking.

Under all kinds of pretexts, Don Rodrigo, with the prior's connivance, managed to delay by nearly a year the date when Alonso was to enter the monastery as a novice. Finally it was decided that the young man should begin his monastic life on January 1st, 1510, the day he entered the eighteenth year of his life. As a present for that solemn day, his mother had prepared for him a golden replica of a silver medal of the Mother and Child she used to wear on a silver chain round her neck ; but Alonso refused it, not merely with firmness—which she might have interpreted as a sign of religious humility—but with a kind of horror and repugnance which puzzled her. The fact was that Alonso hated gold since that scene in his father's study when, as a small boy, he had felt the flow of gold coins fall on his body, bared to receive a beating. Isabel was not aware of this strange feature in her child, while Alonso himself was hardly conscious of it, and therefore unable to explain his attitude. In the end they compromised : the youth accepted his mother's old silver medal, and Isabel wore the golden replica herself.

Thus hallowed by a token twice symbolical of maternal love, Alonso entered the monastery. His first sacrifice to his new life was that of his hair. His long, silken, golden locks fell to the scissors of the lay brother who was in charge of the friars' barber-shop. When she saw her son shorn of his lovely hair Isabel, realising, perhaps for the first time, what the change in her son's life implied, was unable to withhold her tears. Alonso donned the heavy, rough woollen frock of the monk. He was a different person. That was her chief and deepest impression. He belonged to her no longer. That was her second and no less bitter thought.

The solemn mass, the music with which Father Frederick from the small organ filled the nave of the church, the light of hundreds of wax tapers, the incense, the flowers (a touch of Isabel's fancy much frowned at by the sturdy monks) with which she had turned the austere church into a garden—all that atmosphere of religious bliss which, she had dreamt; would waft her soul to heaven on that day she had so often imagined, failed to penetrate her intimate being. What dominated her was the feeling of those two wounds in her heart: he was different and he was no longer hers.

For, shorn of his hair, showing the wiry neck and the profile of the ears and the round line of the skull, clad in an uncouth, woollen frock, far too big for him, Alonso was happy and distant—lost in a dream of his own on the threshold of a world of self-denial which he was starting to discover and explore.

2

The prior had no faith in the youth's vocation. He made Alonso go through the same mental discipline and activity as before and, for the rest, let him come and go in the monastery as he wished. But "brother" Alonso took his new life in dead earnest. He was the first up in the morning, he volunteered for every kind of labour which might be going, even the hardest, even the most repugnant; and he followed every service with the utmost zeal. In fact, he was an exemplary novice.

He took a special pleasure in the humblest tasks. He had felt a fervent enthusiasm when he donned the rough, woollen frock of the friars, instead of the rich and smart clothes which he had worn till then, and was never so happy as when he could spare an older friar and take upon himself some of the painful, dirty or heavy tasks which a community of men is bound to occasion. The feeling that he was conquering the self was for him more than a compensation for the

unpleasantness of the action itself, so that on balance, as he sometimes thought, there was in his new life no self-denial, no sacrifice. It was an effort, a fight, soldiering of a kind, the "hard" world again, victory.

Some of those fights were indeed stiff. Food, for instance. He had been used to the best food most attractively cooked, and had developed a discerning palate. Suddenly he found himself reduced to the drabest, most insipid cooking that could be imagined. Boiled cabbage, often without salt, was the basis of every meal, and to celebrate festivities, a few drops of olive oil might be allowed to the fastidious. He accepted this hardship without a murmur and perhaps without as much difficulty as he had anticipated. Dirt and ill smells were worse enemies. He soon realised that the "odour of sanctity" could be far from pleasant. The brothers were most saintly, but they stank! Water and soap were held as heathenish and some of the friars seemed to think that a louse or two on a friar's frock would be a welcome sight to St. Peter at the gates of Heaven. Alonso, brought up in the utmost cleanliness by his Moorish nurse, felt a mixture of physical repugnance and mental misgiving at the neglected appearance—and reality—of the friars, and found it difficult to get used to the smell which emanated from their bodies. He found it even more difficult to reconcile dirt with sanctity, particularly as the monastery itself was always scrupulously clean; and with his tendency to reason out every aspect of life, he asked himself why the human body should be kept dirty while tables, benches and floors were copiously washed every week and carefully cleaned every day.

He put it to the prior. Father Guzmán explained to him that cleanliness of the body was excellent in itself but apt to become a sensuous pleasure; that strong men, who could keep temptations at bay, could afford to be clean; but that for weaker brethren, exposed to the wiles of the Evil One, the less they troubled about the body the better. "So," he concluded, "better lice in the frock than lice in the conscience." Alonso was much troubled by his answer. It seemed to him that it implied a surrender before the fight. "If cleanliness," he thought, "is a good thing in itself, it must be achieved. If it exposes us to more dangerous temptations, so much the better. Our spirit will be the more deserving when it triumphs over them." But he dared not reply to the prior for fear of falling into the sin of pride.

3

After two years of this struggle, Alonso's life suddenly changed as the result of a visit paid to the monastery by the Father Provincial of

the Order. The Father Provincial noticed the novice at once, asked who he was and sought all possible information about him and about his plans, both from Alonso himself and from the prior. He did not like the position. He felt out of sympathy with Father Guzmán's sceptical attitude over the novice's vocation and feared there might be some friendly favouritism on the part of the prior in the way the young man was allowed to experiment with such things as his religious vocation and his studies and moral training towards ordination. In the end the Father Provincial decided that Alonso should be transferred to another institution less familiar and less close to his own home, a small seminary in the vicinity of Toledo.

The novice left Torremala a fortnight later with a friar of the monastery, both riding mules. They slowly ascended the steep slopes of the central table-land by roads which became stonier and stonier as they moved farther from soft Andalusia into the harder, colder, sterner lands of Castille. The granite stone and its dry dust were trying for man and beast. They imparted a character of their own to the landscape, indeed to the whole environment, and Alonso, who had never yet ventured out of the happier southern lands, felt a kind of awe in his breast as he approached the more forbidding north. The men they met were gradually changing also; they were less lively, less graceful, more taciturn, and in their eyes the light of the south was apt to turn into fire, a sombre fire. The land was poorer, human beings scarcer, the skies not so blue and apt to be crossed and recrossed by angry streaks of dark grey and even of black, and among the rocks one could see now and then a flock of sheep in charge of a solitary shepherd, leather-aproned and fur-capped against the blast of the cold wind which blew from the bleak sierras above.

They arrived in the seminary after sunset one quiet, cold evening, silent but for the tinkling of the bells of a herd of goats which seemed to pick up all the metallic elements of granite and sand in the rocky bones of the valley. A lantern shed a smoky, nebulous light on things and faces. At the door of the seminary Alonso noticed a fat, round, over-fed priest who sized him up with scant courtesy and stepped forward as he was going to enter: "Look here, brother," he barked, and his voice was such that he managed to turn the word "brother" into an insult—"do you think you can enter this place as if it were a mill?" Alonso, nonplussed, said nothing. "Attend to your mule first." A groom emerged from the darkness and showed Alonso and his companion the way to the stables. They were both tired after a long ride, and starving. When at last they were allowed to go indoors, they found the fat priest very much in charge in the refectory. "I suppose you are hungry," he said, "here's some bread and cheese." It was not much and it was not good, but the friar and the novice were

used to privations. They ate what there was and were thankful. Then the priest said, "Go to the chapel. There is a rosary on. Kneel behind the others, so that you do not disturb them. After the rosary, follow the crowd." He spoke imperiously and contemptuously.

4

The Seminary of St. John the Baptist had been founded by Cardinal Ximenez de Cisneros, Archbishop of Toledo and, at the time, regent of the kingdom of Castille. It was a small college for twenty-four students in training for holy orders. Its head, appointed by the great cardinal, was a saintly priest who spent most of his time in prayer and had a high reputation as a mystic. The students saw him now and then, but he hardly ever saw anybody, even in the midst of crowds, for he was nearly always indrawn into a kind of mystic dream. He was a leading example to all, but took no part in the daily round of activities of the house. Under him the real chief and actual tyrant of the college was the dean, a priest of quite a different type. He had been placed under the saintly rector by the hidden hand of intrigue, in order to hand over to the devil the fruit of the tree planted by the Cardinal in the service of God. He was sensuous, violent, round-bellied and heavy-jawed, and when his temper was aroused, which happened frequently, his bulging eyes became bloodshot and looked uncommonly like the eyes of some man-eating animal.

The building was simple and noble—a stone house which might have belonged to some well-to-do soldier-farmer in older days. It was built on broken land, on several levels. There were two small rooms or cells for the two heads; a dormitory for the twenty-four students; a refectory; two or three classrooms and a chapel. The grounds were pleasant and relatively large, planted with olive trees but for a few patches ploughed for vegetables.

When Alonso Manrique entered the chapel, he saw a score of youths of his age, clad in black cassocks, kneeling on the tiled floor, while on the pulpit—low, hardly above the level of the chapel, the rector, Father Xavier, was leading the rosary, with his eyes half-closed and a voice which, though utterly simple, bare, penetrated Alonso's being to the very marrow. He noticed that the fat priest remained outside and did not join them in the prayers.

Alonso knelt next to a student who was—he thought—so absorbed in the rosary that he took no notice of the newcomer's arrival. Alonso had no rosary. He instinctively glanced at his neighbour's and was surprised to find that he was holding it by its cross so that the rosary was hanging upside down. This was an eye-opener for Alonso as to

the piety and devotion of that young man. While he was thus groping his way into his new environment, the neighbour whispered without moving from his outwardly devout position: "Are you the new man?" and without waiting for an answer to his purely formal question, he went on: "How do you like the Boar?" Alonso was worried, troubled, puzzled and amused all in one to find that he had guessed at once that "the Boar" meant the fat priest. "Beware of him," the student whispered on, "he looks like a boar, but he is a mule and a fox as well." Alonso said nothing but could not help smiling. The pious mood in which he had entered the chapel had vanished. He and his companion seemed to be sitting high and dry on the bank of a river of emotion and piety which went murmuring past them with its regular waves of now individual, now collective prayers, now in the simple, moving, tense voice of the leader, now with the rumbling murmur of the score of voices all rolled into one which followed with similar rhythm and sounds.

On the dry bank of the river of prayer the student went on whispering: "You are to be my bedfellow. Hope you don't mind. Notice: Must not eat raw onions. The Boar's rather keen on them. Don't cost much. Can pocket the difference. Ever heard of the proverb on priests? It was coined for the Boar, I'm sure." Alonso's keen curiosity was too much for him and, though something in him frowned at the scene, he yielded to temptation and asked: "What proverb?" The student made bold to glance at him sideways, with a mischievous smile: "Beware of the forepart of a woman——" Alonso's imagination flashed back to that scene in the wood when he had seen Marta shamelessly naked. The student went on talking, finished his proverb, waited for a hilarious reaction and, taken aback by Alonso's silence, who far, far away, had heard nothing after the word "woman," asked: "Did you hear?" There was no answer. "Tut. tut. Squeamish? Priest or no priest, you're sure to have your forepart too, young man. . . . Silence . . . Bad luck!" He went on commenting on the situation according to his lights, while Alonso struggled with his inner world. Woman! The forepart of a woman! All women are whores! . . . That was the general voice of the gutter. He thought again of his mother, of Leonor, the women he loved and respected. He was again plunged into the misery of the Marta episode, when he had stood in the eyes of the world as one who believed in that gutter view and acted on it. And now, he heard it again whispered—dreadful thought!—just as twenty other voices sang the divine grace of the Virgin Mary.

Suddenly Alonso stretched his hand towards the student and said: "Let me have your rosary. I see you . . . don't need it." "Here. Have it. It will be counted to me as an act of charity. I am a most brotherly fellow! . . ." The student chuckled. The one in front of

him moved his foot up and down two or three times to signal him to be quiet. He kept silent and let Alonso gradually glide down into the river of prayer which rolled on, murmuring aves and paternosters in the dim light of the chapel over the twenty black shoulders as over basalt rocks washed smooth by the waves and the years.

5

The rosary was over. They all flocked out of the chapel. Alonso was leaving also when another student, who seemed to him older, touched his elbow and said: "The Rector wants to see you." He retraced his steps, went towards the priest who was awaiting him close to the altar, and kissed his hand. "Welcome," said the quiet, simple voice, with a warmer tone than he had expected. But the voice said no more. The rector looked at Alonso with searching eyes, in silence, for a long time. Alonso felt uncomfortable, as if he were being scrutinised down to his innermost thoughts. "Let us pray together for a while," said the priest. "No set prayers, just a meditation"; and he knelt before the altar. Alonso knelt by his side. He had not recovered his peace which his bedfellow had upset with his bawdy and impious jests. After a long while, which seemed to him longer still, the Rector rose to his feet. "You must come to the chapel and pray often," he concluded. "You need it!" And with a friendly smile, he sent the youth away.

6

When Alonso left the chapel, there was no one to be seen anywhere. He had not yet mastered the shape of the building, which he had not seen by daylight, and was standing at the door of the chapel, wondering where to go and what was the right thing to do. It was dark everywhere, and a lantern at the far end of a kind of arched gallery in which he stood did not shed enough light to give him any guidance.

"What the devil are you doing there?" shouted a rough voice. He recognised the Boar, whose bulky figure emerged from the dark. "Sir——" began Alonso, but the Boar gave him no chance to put his case. "Off you go! To the dormitory!"

"Sir," Alonso began again, wanting to explain that he did not know where the dormitory was. "Go, I say!" roared the Boar savagely. Alonso had never heard any one address him in such a voice, and never in any of his meditations, never in his mental ex-

periences, had he envisaged such a situation nor dreamt that subservience to a wild boar on human legs could be part and parcel of a true monastic life. His Visigothic blood was up. "Sir!" This time, he did not say it, he shouted it. The Boar was taken aback. No one had ever shouted at him either. While he was still under the shock, Alonso was able to put his case. "I don't know this place. Show me the way!" He spoke imperiously, as he had never spoken to any one before, surprised at his own mood—not his indeed, but dictated to him from far back, beyond his birth, by some imperious Visigoth or some impatient Moor in his ancestry. The Boar did not react. God knows what patient, humble ancestor in his obscure blood made him bow his head and obey. He marched off without a word, took Alonso to the dormitory, opened the door, stood aside, let him pass in complete silence, shut the door behind him and went away.

He stepped heavily down the stone stairs, stamping ponderously now on this now on that foot with all the weight of his stout frame. He was furious having been betrayed into meekness by a mere stripling just because he happened to be in the right, and he went to his room swearing to avenge himself. Meanwhile Alonso stood close to the door, trying to get his eyes tuned to the darkness. There was no light other than the tiny faint flame of an oil night-lamp burning before an image (which it was too weak to define) on the wall opposite where he stood. The room was long and there were two rows of six wide beds on each side, as he could guess. Presently, just below the image, on the right hand side, a lamp or some kind of light was lit, apparently close to the ground, beyond the last bed. There was no motion anywhere, no shadow was cast on the wall by that mysterious lamp. Alonso stepped forward. As soon as he moved, the lamp went out and there was a general shuffle of feet at the end of the room. Silence again. He moved on. Presently, a student laughed and said in a loud whisper: "It is just the new man. Curse the fellow!" A general shuffle again and the lamp shone in the corner. By then, Alonso had reached the far-end wall. He glanced round. A group of eight or ten youths were playing cards on the floor.

His bedfellow was one of the onlookers. As soon as he saw Alonso he rose to his feet and said, "Come along. I will show you our bed." He took him to one of the beds on the left-hand side. They were made of three planks on trestles of wood. Over the planks, a rough mattress—a bag rather—of a mixture of straw and flock-wool. Over the mattress a blanket. The students slept in their day-clothes. "Here," said Alonso's companion, showing the bed as if he were bidding him enter a palace. "You may go to sleep if you wish—on this side, please—I am going to watch the game."

7

Alonso was so tired that he fell asleep as soon as he laid his head on the pillow. The next thing that happened was strange and inexplicable to him. The Rector, clad in white robes which seemed to be made of the luminous tissue of clouds in the sun, was leading him by the hand higher and ever higher up in space. They were wafted across a garden of jessamine, nothing but jessamine everywhere, which filled the air with its heavy perfume; then through another garden of carnations, which shone in the sun with their curly petals, fresh and fragrant; then through a garden of roses, where the air was saturated with the deepest most penetrating and perturbing scent, roses which under their flesh-coloured feminine petals, hid sharp thorns, which blushed delicately and sensitively down to the stem. "It cannot be. How can I see all those details when I am just passing," thought part of his mind, while the other part lived and enjoyed it all without any qualms whatsoever. Alonso gave himself over to the joy of this voyage. How long had it lasted? He could not say. Suddenly, as he was being wafted out of the garden of roses on to—what?—there was a crash. The sky turned red and he fell heavily on the hard earth.

He rose to his feet scratching his head, amidst the chorus of laughter of his comrades. The head trestle of the bed had been kicked out of place by his bedfellow at waking time. The light of dawn illumined the whole scene. Alonso looked at his head. It was red with blood from a small wound in his head. "We've saved your life!" said the bedfellow. "You wouldn't wake up. The Boar would have found you asleep—and God knows what might have happened. He might have devoured you." Alonso was ashamed and made manly efforts to master his Visigothic temper.

The students flocked out. He followed them. He watched them with curiosity. His bedfellow was one of those quick-willed, quick-handed mongrels which all capitals produce. He came from Toledo and was probably a blend of as many bloods as Alonso himself, though in different proportions, for Toledo was then one of the most Moorish and one of the most Jewish towns in Spain. It was also one of the most prosperous, lively and illustrious, the true capital of the budding Empire. Young Julian, his bedfellow, had grown up in its thronged streets, where peasants who came to sell their produce, tradesmen, officials of the Court and of the Cardinal's offices and noblemen flowed past each other, mixed though not blended, intent on their several activities. Julian had gaped at many a picturesque march-past and noble procession, played many a prank at the expense of many a peasant, stoned many a window, pinned a paper tail on the gown of

many a pompous lawyer, gambled at cards many a maravedí which he did not possess, when he was sent to the seminary by his uncle, a Canon of the cathedral, who hoped to retrieve him both morally and materially. Julian was small, wiry, sharp-witted, both active and lazy. There were other types like him ; others* obviously of peasant stock, sturdy, almost rough, some of them honest and simple, others crafty and foxy, to judge at any rate by their looks. None of these seemed to Alonso really drawn to priesthood by a deep vocation ; they looked rather like men who had chosen the church as a career . . . just as they might have chosen the law or any other walk of life. A few of them, however, were obviously men of deep piety, with a sincere vocation. They could be spotted at once in the group.

The students had run down the stairs and out into the terrace to a well, but Alonso remained suddenly spell-bound by the sight which struck his eyes : Toledo on its rocky pedestal, rose in the pink horizon, with its longing spires, grey, pointed desires taut towards the high morning sky. He felt as if some magician had plucked his longing soul and suddenly thrown it on the screen of the horizon for all men to see. Yes. That was his very soul—or at least, that was how he felt his soul to be—a rocky mountain rising over an ever flowing, deep, muddy river, and thrusting its towers and spires and minarets at the inaccessible heavens. He was so moved that he leant back on the wall by the door ; for the town, the hill, the river, the rocks, the wiry undergrowth, the tortuous, hollow, olive trees, everything even down to the grains of sand in which the slanting rising sun scintillated—seemed to have a being, dry, strong, sharp, metallic, incisive ; everything came forward, penetrated, drove itself in and overmastered the genial Andalucian with the perennial power of Castille.

“What are you doing there?” shouted the Boar. Alonso was shaken out of his dream. He then realised that he had been standing there under a spell while his comrades washed by a stone cistern close to the well. “Ah, you do not like washing? There are people like that!” said the Boar with studied contempt. The image of Leonor rose in Alonso’s memory and made him smile. The Boar disliked that smile. “More respect, young man. You may be dirty if you wish, but you need not be proud of it. At any rate, you seem the right man to do the latrines. Come this way.” And he led Alonso to the filthiest corner of the grounds, leaving him as his part of the household work to empty the latrines of their contents and to transport the dung to a special heap at the other end of the long kitchen garden. “It should not take you more than an hour,” he explained good-naturedly, and he went away, muttering : “That will teach you to shout at me !”

Alonso stood there, looking at the infamous ditch, overwhelmed. The change had been so rapid that he could hardly realise how it had

come about. He had in his hand a shovel which the Boar had given him and held it, dispirited, dejected, miserable. Tears began to flow from his eyes. Was it this? His yearning for monastic life, his search for God—was it this? And a voice in him asked admonishingly: "What did you expect? Were you coming to Me or were you just running away from the world? You are in the dung-heap—the place fit for cowards." He blushed at the insult and revolted. He was not a coward. Then he was ashamed of his shame. "I am in the dark. I will seek the Light and find strength in it for this." He let the spade go and there, on the edge of the stinking ditch, he knelt down and tried to pray. He tried and tried but failed. The rosary upside down and the bawdy jokes of Julian, the bestial snout of the Boar, the stench of the infamous ditch stood between him and God. He failed miserably, the more so as he had fought stubbornly and strenuously, feeding his endeavour with a spirit which was not the spirit of prayer and love but that of struggle, more akin to hate. He rose to his feet in a manly fury, determined to get through with it. After all, it was not the first time he cleaned latrines. He had done so at the Moor's Hill to forestall a friar (who used to do it in a spirit of self-sacrifice) one day when this friar happened to be ill. What had upset him was not the fact, but the spirit, the menial, servile setting into which it had been cast by the tyrannous Boar.

He stripped and put away his frock to keep it free from dirt and smell, then filled the pails, slung over his shoulder a thick rope with two hooks from which the two pails were to be carried hanging from his neck, stepped inside a square wooden frame which was carried resting on the two pails to keep them from coming too close to the carrier's legs, and began to move across the kitchen garden. The rope dug itself into his neck, driving into his skin the silver chain of his Mother-and-Child medal, which dangled on his chest. To and fro he went for an hour, so self-absorbed that he did not hear the jokes cracked at his expense by his comrades, who with spade, shovel and hoe were all working in the kitchen garden," earning their breakfast," as the Boar used to say.

When his job was finished, he hesitated for a while. He did not want to don his cassock again without washing first. Julian turned up from nowhere in particular. "Look here, brother, I know what is in your mind. Come with me, out of the way of the Boar. I'll carry your frock." He took Alonso to a shady corner in the kitchen garden in which there was a large stone drinking trough. "I will keep an eye on the Boar. You have plenty of time." Alonso washed himself thoroughly in the open air. The morning was cold. The feeling of cleanliness, of cold water and of cold air was exhilarating. He was a new man. Things began to take on a new aspect. Julian's jokes were

bawdy but his heart was in the right place. He felt even hungry. The bell in the little square whitewashed tower rang three times. "Come quick! That's breakfast. The Boar won't wait. Let's go in by different doors."

8

They sat down at a long table presided over by the Boar. He muttered a perfunctory blessing, and the cook—an old woman, the only servant in the whole establishment—served the breakfast: a plate of garlic soup for the students and a plate of ham and eggs for the Boar. It was long since he had lost all sense of shame about it. He always ate more and better than the rest of the school and did not care what any one thought about it. There were two seats empty; those of two students who were fasting that day and who, according to usage, were allowed to spend all the meal times in the chapel. During his predecessor's days, a student who happened to be fasting read some sacred book at meals; but the Boar held that reading at meals was bad both for the spirit and for the flesh (one of the few things in which he was perhaps right). "Have they let you know?" he asked the cook. "No, sir," answered the female. The Boar was wroth. "Go and fetch them!" he grunted. The cook went to wrench the two devout youths from their meditations in the chapel. "What the Devil," the Boar roared at them, "do you mean by making us waste food? What is the use of fasting if you——" He cut himself short, realising where his impulsive folly was leading him when he saw the grins it had already raised in many a mischievous face. Fasting, for him, was merely a means of saving kitchen expenses, a direct profit for him. The culprits, who looked upon fasting in a different light, had omitted to warn the cook in time for her to save their rations. They stood there, looking very foolish and unworldly. "Are you fasting throughout the day?" asked the Boar. "Yes, sir," they answered. "Cook, take note," he said; then to the youths: "You may return to your prayers. And pray for a better memory!"

The Boar turned to Alonso. "Did you finish your job?" he asked with an eye in which there shone a malicious pleasure. "Yes, sir."

"How much Latin do you know?"

"A fair amount," answered Alonso objectively.

"Modesty is a Christian virtue," rebuked the Boar.

"I answered your question, sir," retorted Alonso. The Boar banged the table and the veins under his jaws swelled visibly in his thick, short neck. "Don't retort!" Alonso looked down to hide the fire in his eyes. He blushed red. There was a silence. "What have

you read?" asked the Boar, feeling the caustic eyes of the students on him. "The *Commentaries* and also the *Confessions of St. Augustine*."

The Boar was impressed and did not like it. "Do you know any other ancient language?"

"Hebrew, sir." He had said it in his usual, well-controlled, matter-of-fact voice. The Boar's eyebrows rose up to the middle of his forehead. "Ah!" he exclaimed in a tone loaded with intention, "I guessed as much!" There was a silence.

"Who is Elder Brother, this week?" asked the Boar. Julian answered, "I am, sir."

"That fits in beautifully." The Boar smiled, which did not suit his face. "Brother Alonso needs no help from us in Latin. He knows more than any of us. He has just told us so. So, as this morning is mostly a Latin one anyhow, you Brother Julian will take him to Toledo and between you two, you will bring back the coffer with the new chasubles which the Chief Sexton in the Cathedral has set aside for us. It is a bit heavy but you are both young and hefty. On the way back you will call at Esquivel's and bring back the spit I left there last week to be refitted."

9

Julian and Alonso set out for Toledo at once. Alonso was longing to ask who that Esquivel was; but some instinct of caution made him refrain. He was walking briskly with goat steps down the stony slopes of the hill which led from the school to the bridge. "You must have noticed by now," said Julian, "that the Boar has a special liking for you! I don't know what you have done, but he will certainly do his best to keep you busy." Alonso kept silent. "He has already given you two jobs of those he reserves for his favourite enemies—the filth and the carrying of a heavy coffer. And all that on a plate of garlic soup . . . But . . . we shall see who laughs best. To begin with, I suppose you are hungry."

"I am," answered Alonso, speaking for the first time.

"Then, if you saw me enter one of the best inns in Toledo and ask for two rations of roast mutton with a salad and saw that I only ate one ration, would you let the other one go back to the kitchen?"

Alonso laughed for the first time since he had left Torremala. "But where do the masses come from?" he asked.

"Do you mean who pays for the mutton?" asked Julian. They were crossing St. Martin's bridge, and a flock of ewes and sheep was trotting down towards them in a cloud of dust. "Never mind who pays. I keep a ewe," he said cryptically, and added even more cryptically, "or rather she keeps me."

They passed under the gate-arch, entering a labyrinth of streets familiar to Julian, unknown to Alonso, who therefore could not observe that they were not going towards the Cathedral. Julian did not seem in a hurry. He went about casting curious glances right and left, noting even the smallest changes in the streets and even in the looks of people. They had passed the Zocodover and were now walking down a steep slope on the other side of the town, when suddenly, Julian said: "Wait a few minutes. I shan't be long," and he disappeared into a large but ill-kept yellow house. Alonso leant over a stone parapet which looked down upon the valley. "What is it," he dreamt, "that makes me feel the hard world so close in these northern lands? It is as if these rocks, even these trees, barked angrily at me. There can be no peace here. . . ."

Someone touched his shoulder. Julian was beaming. In one hand he had a small parcel wrapped in a kerchief; the other hand, in a pocket hidden under his cassock, jingled a few coins which made a gay metallic noise. A welcome noise. That was the feeling which stole into Alonso's heart. He wanted the metal which he had spurned, because he wanted the food which that metal could buy. He paced the stony streets beside his companion briskly, in anticipation of the feast. He gave no thought whatever to the origin of the money. He never had in his life, as one for whom money had always been natural. Presently Julian entered an inn with the air of a man who comes back home, followed by Alonso for whom everything was new and strange. Through the ample portal, where an ass was patiently waiting tied in a dark corner, they passed on to a big central yard, round which the several buildings of various sizes, looks and ages which made up the ramshackle inn were gathered as it were in conference, gazing on to a variety of vehicles, horses, mules, asses and a number of turbulent dogs. Julian piloted his friend skilfully through all these animate and inanimate obstacles towards a small door which stood open at the top of three well-worn stone steps.

"Good-morning," he said to a buxom woman of about forty who sat behind a counter at the far end of the room. "What are you up to now?" asked mine hostess who knew Julian and all his pranks. "I am after two good rations of roast mutton with a salad, and here are my letters patent." He laid a silver coin on the counter. Mine hostess picked it up, looked at it, turned it over, looked at it again, threw it on the table, letting it spring back and clink repeatedly, just to hear its voice, and finally bit it hard, to test its mettle. "Juana!" she called. A maid appeared. She handed the two men over to her and bade her feed them well.

The two youngsters devoured their fare and now and then helped it down with draughts of a delicious, though slightly sour red wine.

Julian was in the best of spirits. "Were it not for this," he said, "how could one bear the Boar?"

"What a strange priest!" naïvely observed Alonso. Julian grinned: "Strange? Not so strange. God knows I am a devout believer in His word" (and he crossed himself), "but it is a shame and a sin to allow people without vocation, like the Boar—or like me!—to take holy orders, just because it is good business."

"Is that why there are so many bad priests?" asked Alonso. And his companion, in dead earnest: "It is even worse than that. For when a man who is not meant to be a priest becomes a priest, he turns sour within, and becomes not only a bad priest but a bad man, worse than he was meant to be. That is why priests have such a bad reputation. But one never hears about the good ones, while the bad ones, everybody talks and talks about them. Do you remember the proverb I told you in chapel?"

"I was so much upset by the beginning that I did not hear the end," avowed Alonso.

"Why by the beginning?"

"Say it again," begged Alonso.

"Beware of the forepart of a woman, of the hindpart of a horse, of either side of a mule and of the whole roundabout of a priest!"

Alonso laughed heartily. Then he felt ashamed and blushed. "I don't like it. It is so insulting to women!"

"Oh," said Julian callously, "all whores, just like hens!"

Alonso was astounded to hear the same words which Antonio used to say. He gathered it was a stock commonplace amongst men.

"Take this," said Julian, and he pointed at the meal. They were eating big chunks of Manchegan cheese and thick Castillian white bread. "Do you know who is paying for this?" He gazed at Alonso long enough to allow the surprise he prepared to ripen. "The Boar!"

"What!" Alonso was horrified.

"The Boar," Julian repeated most pleased with himself. "Let me explain this mystery to you. The seminary is endowed by the Cardinal. Generously. For instance, our meat rations are two pounds per head per day. But the Boar starves us and pockets the money. With the money, part of it at least, he keeps a whore——"

"But, but——" stammered Alonso, "a priest!"

"Why! Don't you know?" Julian laughed at his companion's innocence. "They all do. Those I mean, you know. Very well, he keeps a woman, much younger than he is. She, poor thing, needs better company than that old pig who pays her debts and . . . She seems to like me for a change. So, I do my best to please her and she is grateful and we eat well at the Boar's expense."

Alonso with his head between his hands, his elbows on the table,

sank into a dejected meditation. "What a world!" he thought. Julian did not notice his state of mind. He thought his companion had just altered his posture the better to listen to his talk, and he went on: "I chuckle when I think how I rob my thief! That is the beauty of it. Let us go now, for we must pass by Esquivel's workshop." He rose and began to look around. "Where is the parcel?" he asked. "Didn't you see a parcel I had which she gave me for her father?" Alonso had found it on the seat and was handing it to him. He grew pale. "Her . . . what do you mean?" "Yes," answered Julian, "the Boar's friend . . . and mine is the daughter of Esquivel."

10

It was like a blow on the head. The revelation of that concrete fact was so sudden, coming after that other revelation of the strange world into which he had strayed when he least expected it, that he was dumbfounded and stupefied. He followed Julian out of the inn and into the street like a sleep-walker, unaware of his surroundings, brooding over that monstrous happening—he, Alonso Manrique, had eaten a meal paid for by Marta Esquivel, with money she had made by selling her body to a priest! "All women are whores!" jeered Antonio in his mental ear; and Julian echoed: "Just like hens!"

"Let us go first to Esquivel's," said Julian.

"Esquivel? . . . Esquivel? . . ." he asked, still struggling to adjust the outer and the inner worlds. "Ah, yes! The spit." He followed Julian and, as they entered the street in which Esquivel's shop was, he said: "You go in and get the spit. I should like to drop in here for a prayer." He pointed to a church. Julian glanced at him, wondering what sort of a man he was. "Perhaps a true vocation," he thought, shrugging his shoulders and said: "Very well. Don't make me wait. Come out to the porch."

The church was dark, quiet and solitary. Alonso knelt before the altar. He could not pray. He knew he would not be able to pray but he wanted to think things out. He had not yet been one whole day in Toledo and it seemed to him he had aged by several years. So this was Toledo! Men were like the Boar at their worst and like Julian at their best; women were like Marta. Religion was a farce. Priests were—boars. No! Something revolted in him. The Rector was a saintly man. He would speak to the Rector. He would tell him all. No matter what came out of it. But—objected another voice in him—Marta is sure to produce the story of your relations with her, which

would go down beautifully here, and even fit in very well with your attitude, for she would not fail to point out that you had spoken out of jealousy . . . and then, there is Julian, Are you going to give him away ? . . . Give away ! . . . Give away ! . . . I am saving him from the lie in which he lives . . .

Julian whispered in his ear : " Come out, you saint-eater ! " They stepped out into the sun and Alonso felt his resolution fade in the light of day like a candle at dawn. They went to the Cathedral sacristy, found the box ready and seizing it each by a handle, began their way back. It was hot and the box was heavy. They stopped several times, the last within sight of the Boar, who on the terrace, leaning over the parapet was waiting for them, obviously in a temper. " You watch me stop that bull dead in his fury," said Julian. " It will be good fun. Say nothing till I speak and back me up."

" What the hell have you been doing, you two ? Running the taverns, I bet."

" No, sir," answered Julian coolly. " Esquivel's fault. He was not in. We were sent to his daughter's house." Long pause, during which the Boar's forehead showed drops of sweat. " Couldn't find it. Sorry to be so stupid. We were given a very good description. Esquivel's foreman kept repeating : ' The Dean knows it well.' But we couldn't find it. Perhaps, sir, you might describe the way to us for another time. And so——"

" Very well, very well," the Boar cut in (somewhat mollified). " Let us waste no more time in explanations. Give the spit to the cook. Leave the chasubles in the sacristy. And go to the refectory. We are all waiting. Aren't you hungry ? "

" Starving, sir. Thank you."

II

Alonso could not eat, mostly because he had already eaten, and well. But he was gloomy and concerned. This was the Boar's opportunity. " Brother Alonso does not eat in spite of his morning's exertions. I suppose he is thinking of his native village where his grandparents are buried——" Alonso blushed. He was the only one to realise the poison in the Dean's taunt. The Dean knew that one of Alonso's grandparents had been expelled and wanted Alonso to know that he knew.

This tension went on for weeks. It was so acute, so relentless, that it did not allow Alonso to settle his own problem in peace. His problem was : Should he tell ? Or should he countenance all that corruption which he had witnessed, by keeping silent about it ? Whenever he

tried to approach the subject in his mind and to solve it honestly, he felt this unworthy personal animosity as an obstacle between his clean purpose and his clear aim. "How can I," he thought, "face the real issue squarely when it is entangled with this irrelevant hatred?" He had been clarifying the issue gradually in his mind. He disliked the idea of reporting to the Rector over the head of the Dean. The "hard world" man in him revolted against such sneaky methods. Though he might have to speak to the Rector in the end, he felt he could not do it without putting the matter to the Dean first. His honesty and his inexperience had led him to this state of mind. As for Julian, he would not give him away and moreover he thought that once the main shame had been exposed and corrected, the minor one could be easily cured.

His life went on through the daily round of activities of the seminary, with this tension ever working deep down in him, while on the surface the Boar kept him in a state of constant irritation, by a policy of petty persecutions and pin-pricks. He was longing for a few days of peace in which to launch his great moral attack with a pure heart. He was not aware of the explosive power of the anger he was burying under the shovelfuls of patience which, day after day, month after month, he had to heap over it. One day, as he was watching a game of ninepins, in which the Boar was past master, Julian said to him: "Watch his face. Every time he knocks one down, he feels he has won a victory over us. We are thin and tall like pins; he is small and round like a ball. So, he is all for the ball against the pins. That is why he plays so well." Alonso turned his attention to another side of the field, where some of his comrades were throwing an iron bar, and took a part in it, soon in fact the leading part, for he was the most vigorous of the company. This exercise brought out all his hidden energy—the "hard world" man repressed in him. The game of ninepins was over. He was holding the bar in his hand. The iron ball was lying idle on the ground. Alonso lifted the bar and let it fall furiously on the ball which went bounding at top speed and passed within a foot of the Boar. All looked up.

"Who did that?"

"I, sir," answered Alonso, "I did not mean——"

"Very well. You will wash up in the kitchen to-night."

Julian was impressed.

Whether because he also was impressed or for some other reason, the Dean left Alonso alone for over a week. The moment had come. Alonso asked to be excused from services and lessons for a day, as he needed spiritual help and wished to devote twenty-four hours to fasting

and prayers. The Boar looked him up and down as one gazes at a curious animal, and said, "If it is your wish. . . ."

Alonso spent the whole of the twenty-four hours in church. He took no food and hardly any sleep. He prayed, thought and prayed again. Nothing came into his mind during those twenty-four hours to deflect him from his course. The main question which he kept putting to himself was : "Do I act because I want to avenge myself?" And time and again, he answered it : "I do feel resentful because of the way he treats me ; but I know that this feeling has nothing to do with my decision to speak to him." At the end of the twenty-four hours which he had given himself he was as determined as he had been at the beginning.

He arrived in the refectory in time for breakfast. Everybody noticed that he looked different. His eyes were hard ; his brow was set. He ate heartily. When the breakfast was over, and all had dispersed to their morning duties which kept them here and there for an hour before the first morning class, Alonso accosted the Dean and said : "Sir, I have a hard and grave duty to perform with you and I feel the sooner the better." The Boar had never heard words of such authority coming from such quarters. But determination in his interlocutor always caught him unawares. He glanced at Alonso with the eyes of a tracked beast and said : "I am ready." "Here?" asked Alonso. "Come out to the terrace. We shall be alone."

They paced the terrace, on the edge of the higher level of the grounds, close to the low parapet which rose no higher than their knees. Toledo silhouetted its roofs and spires over the blue sky. "Sir," Alonso began with a firm voice, "when I came to this place and when, earlier, I entered a monastery as a novice, my aim was and still is to become a priest. I hold the highest opinion of that ministry. I believe it demands the utmost sacrifice and the utmost purity and the most irreproachable behaviour." The Dean listened in silence, still under the spell of Alonso's commanding voice. "I am in earnest, in dead earnest about it. Now, you may imagine my astonishment and my grief when I found that this house harbours cases of the worst vices that can dishonour the church."

"Who?" barked the Dean. His mood had changed. He smelt the danger and was now ready for a fight. Alonso was unperturbed. "I told you I am in dead earnest. I am determined, at whatever cost, to cleanse this house. I entreat you to see the Light. . . ." The Boar stopped dead by the edge of the low parapet. He looked up at Alonso's face—the ball looking at the pin as Julian would have put it. "Ah, that is what he meant. He knew!" His heavy, protruding eyes rolled wildly. His mouth became square with defiance, hatred and contempt. His lips were moist with foam. "You! Dirty dog of a Jew!"

In the depths of Alonso's body a sudden clamour arose from the distant past, from a horizon far beyond his birth. His Visigothic ancestors, riding rough-shod over half Europe and the whole of Spain; his Moorish ancestors, riding rough-shod over half Africa and also overrunning Spain, the long lines of northern and of southern captains, who, in their actual life would have delighted in slashing and whipping to death any Jew who might have ventured across the path of their horses, now galloped forward in his blood through the scores of converging avenues of his past to defend the Jew in him with whom they now were one within the same soul and skin—they rushed forward, galloping furiously, entered his right arm, raised it like a spear and thrust it at the Boar's wide, round face. The big, unsteady body reeled, he toppled over the parapet and fell ten feet down on the stone slabs below, a heavy inanimate mass.

13

A dark lifetime, so it seemed to him, on the edge of the abyss. The questions put to him by the Enquirer, one of the Cardinal's secretaries, his answers, his own ultimate fate were for him like dreams, hallucinations. The real world, the real storm was within: His Faith shattered. His faith . . . in whom? His faith in himself, his confidence in his own inner light, which enabled him to find out, or at any rate to feel whether the Light he perceived was the true one. There, in the Archbishop's prison, mildly treated as one in whose veins flowed the blood of the Cardinal's predecessor, Alonso had ample leisure to meditate. It seemed to him that his violent action had proved him unfit for the Church. For him a priest was a man who has turned his hard world inwards, leaving his outward person free for soft-world activities. He was not such a man. And yet—

While he suffered mental agonies, struggling with his own complex self, his destiny was being settled over his head. The Cardinal had taken a personal interest in the case, and his Enquirer, a shrewd and honest cleric, had presented to him an accurate picture of the facts and persons involved. The Cardinal wrote to Don Rodrigo and explained the unhappy episode, declaring himself ready to let the young man go free from all civil-law consequences on condition that his father should send him to the Indies within a month of his release from jail. As for the sin committed he meant to be stricter and would have to discuss the matter personally with the sinner. As soon as Don Rodrigo's answer reached him—agreeing, of course, with his generous suggestions—the Cardinal had Alonso brought to his presence.

He was sitting at a long, black table on which a large leather-bound

Bible lay open on a book-rest. He was dressed in his usual fashion as a plain Franciscan monk. Alonso noticed his aquiline nose and his fiery, black eyes. He looked stern, but by no means uncharitable. As he entered the room, Alonso was so upset, so suddenly overwhelmed by a renewed sense of his own guilt as the man who had killed another man, that he fell on his knees and hid his face in his hands. The Cardinal said nothing for a while, then, with a paternal, an almost affectionate voice, he ordered: "Rise and come to me." He turned sideways, beckoning the young man to approach round the large table, to his side of it. There was a kneeling-stool there; the Cardinal's own. "Kneel down," he directed. "I do not ask you to confess yourself to me, but I ask you to speak with as much openness and courage." Alonso wept. "Are you sure, absolutely sure, that there was no resentment in your soul?" There was a long silence. Alonso's face was hidden in his hands. His head moved sideways. No. He was not sure. "I have arranged with your father that you are to sail for the Indies. You must give up your intention of becoming a monk and a priest. The Lord does not call you that way. But for the sake of your soul, you must do penance for this all your life. I lay on you an obligation to observe the vow of chastity as if you were a priest."

Alonso looked up astonished, "Sir," he said, "I meant to offer that sacrifice to you."

"That shows that the idea comes from above," said the Cardinal. He raised his fingers in a gesture of blessing. "Go. All is ready."

14

The first thing he saw on the horizon was the spire of the monastery. How his heart ached! What a homecoming from his first endeavour towards his high dreams. He was no longer wearing clerical dress and was riding not a mule but a horse. His hair was long again. Brother Alonso had died—died in shame; and Alonso Manrique was again riding out.

He dreaded his first meeting with his mother, but Isabel had prepared herself carefully for it and showed neither her grief for the past nor her concern for the future; she allowed no feeling to pass out from her well-guarded soul to her face but her joy at seeing him again.

His father was, on the whole pleased and, had he been pressed hard, would have owned that a fat calf of a low-born priest was not too high a price to pay for his son's delivery from his monkish disguise. Had he known the severe condition laid on Alonso by the Cardinal, he might have thought otherwise, but he was kept in ignorance of it. As for old

Suárez, he was overjoyed under his well controlled reserve and said to his young master : " You were never meant to live by sucking the oil of church lamps." Though in different words, that was exactly the comment which Father Guzmán made on seeing him. " It was not your way of life " (and I knew it, he added mentally without letting his secret out). " But the Lord may be served in every walk of life and you shall find in the Indies a wide scope to serve Him."

Alonso looked at things and people with new eyes. Nothing gave him a better measure of how much he had aged during his absence from Torremala (just over a year) than the change he saw in it, which was in fact his own change. Once the whole world for him, Torremala was now but a small corner of it. The quiet haven of serenity, authority, property in which he had lived till he had ventured out of it in search of a religious life, now turned out to be an artificially contrived backwater in the powerful and formidable river of life. He had plunged into that river ere he knew that it existed. The river had thrown him back violently to the backwater of peace—but only for a brief respite. Presently, he would start again, and he must be ready. This time, he would launch out with the advantage of knowing that there is no rest anywhere for men.

The Cardinal's award could not be played with. Within a month from the day of his interview in the Cardinal's palace, Alonso had to embark for the Indies. A week had gone by ; the only ship available was a caravel leaving Palos within two weeks. There was not one day to lose. Alonso was to take a mare with him, for Spaniards going to the Indies were requested, when they could afford a mount, to take mares rather than horses. His father prepared his clothes and weapons ; the best wool from Segovia and the best leather from Cordoba and the best steel from Toledo and one or two priceless heirlooms ; his mother attended to the food for his long voyage, and particularly to the home-made jams which were such a boon at sea.

At last everything was ready and Don Rodrigo asked his son to come to his study. On the table, there was a row of heaps of gold coins and a flat red leather purse waiting to swallow them. " Here," he said, " are one hundred ducats to start you off." Alonso blushed as red as the purse. Gold made him ashamed. " Put them in the purse," said his father. There had been a time when Alonso would have been utterly unable to obey ; but he had acquired the power to do violence to his strongest feelings. He conquered his deep repugnance and one by one, threw the coins inside the purse. His father gave him letters for Hernán Cortés and for Miguel de Passamonte who was King's Treasurer in the Island of Santo Domingo, the chief establishment of Spain overseas.

Alonso cut short his last interview with his mother as much as

possible. He felt that the river of life was too unsavoury for him to discuss it with her, and while he was more attached to her than ever, he was less inclined than of old to open his heart to her. The most he could do was to promise to return soon—in which he was sincere. He felt equally reserved towards the Prior. Both had ceased to be his confidential counsellors. Both remained high in his affections, but both—it seemed to him, rather petulantly—belonged to the secluded world of his youth and infancy. He asked the blessing of both yet felt almost impatient to be away.

One Sunday morning, at dawn, he left Torremala on horseback with his father. Suárez rode behind with a groom in charge of the mules with his luggage and stores. As they reached the top of the hill he turned back for a last glance at his native valley—just as his grandfather the rabbi had done. Contrary to his expectation he was not moved. He saw it with an everyday eye, without emotion, almost with indifference. "It is going to be hot," he said.

Within a few days he was waving his handkerchief at his father and at Suárez who, on the shore, remained outwardly unruffled, inwardly stirred at the sight of the caravel slowly gliding down the river towards the open sea. Alonso was still in his cold, unmoved mood, and not one eyelash quivered in his eyes when the harbour in which his father stood vanished out of sight. They sailed down the widening river for hours, past the island of Saltes and at last entered the sea—the sea he had never seen. The coast melted away into the grey horizon. Nothing but the sea. North, south, east, west, nothing but the sea. It was so obvious, and yet he could not understand it. "Nothing but the sea," his mind repeated, stunned by the liquid immensity on which he floated. And from the depth of his memory there emerged that verse his mother used to sing :

Beware of love for it is a wide, wide sea ! . . .

Book Two

THE GRINNING GODS

PART VII

ALONSO MANRIQUE DISCOVERS THE NEW WORLD

I

ALONSO enjoyed the voyage to the Indies, despite its physical discomforts, mainly because of the feeling of space which it gave him. How big the world was ! For a youth full of vigour (he was then twenty-two), with his future still uncreated before him, this thought, so bright with hope and with pride, was more than enough to compensate him for the many unpleasant aspects of a crossing in which human beings and animals were herded together in a closed space, tossed moreover by the sea which shook them together as if the better to mix their humours and odours. Though able to afford a private bunk of his own, in a set of cabins built in the main castle aft, he was no more able than any of the other voyagers to spare his nostrils the thick nauseating air of the hull, a clearing house of smells, mostly kitchen, but also stables, lavatory, hospital, laundry-house and fishing-port, above which, thank God, the clean, salt-laden, invigorating wind remained for ever unpolluted and self-purifying. He had grown to love the rhythmical creaking of the ship's frame and the vibration of the three masts when the sea struck a well-aimed blow amidships, and the shrill whining of the ropes distended by their constant efforts, which gave the caravel an almost human personality. At sunset, the sailors, according to a time-honoured tradition, sang the *Salve Regina*. This moment of the day always moved him deeply. He had noticed how the light of that august hour transfigured every face, even that of the worst rascals on board, and made them tense with a longing which raised them above themselves. Alonso, who, with all the other passengers, joined in the singing, was left hallowed by this emotion till late at night, when in the dark, tossed up and down to the familiar music of the creaking of the wooden frame and the whining of the ropes, he would reflect on the extent to which the life of all those human beings crossing the ocean in a nutshell was in the hand of God. Often in religious texts and in books or church images, he had met with the idea that God holds the world in His hand, but it had never been

more than an idea or a picture for him. Now it was a fact ; for every time the caravel fell down to the void, it was as if the Lord withdrew His hand to make them all feel that it was He who held them from the abyss.

This thought turned his mind towards the Indies. He had often heard the monks at the monastery argue over the Spanish conquest of the New World, to elucidate, not indeed, as our contemporaries would have done, whether it was profitable or not, but whether it could be reconciled with the Christian faith. Father Guzmán was clear about it : only the fact that they carried the Gospels with them could justify the Spanish occupation of the Indies. Now he saw that it was the Lord's hand which took their caravels over beyond the seas. And yet—thought Alonso—to his own personal knowledge, he was the third man whom a community as small as Torremala sent to the Indies, not because of his ability to teach the Gospels, but on the contrary, in order to get rid of an inconvenient person in the motherland. A bitter thought for an earnest mind.

One lovely morning in January, 1504, the graceful caravel sailed up the River Ozama into Santo Domingo. Alonso's eyes feasted on the unfamiliar sights—the tall, slender trees, the crowd of Indians and Negroes, moving here and there on the busy quay, the vivid colours and the limpid light which seemed to bathe everything with a new life. The town was not so unfamiliar. It was built like the Andalusian towns he knew, amidst lemon and orange groves. It was brand new, for the last Governor, Ovando, had transferred it to the side on which it stood, from the opposite bank where it had been founded by Bartolomé Colón, the brother of the discoverer.

An old man, straight as a pole, dignified and, as could be seen at a glance, universally respected, attracted his attention. Alonso accosted him. "Sir," he asked, "could you tell me how I could send a letter to the King's Treasurer, Miguel de Passamonte?" The old man smiled and answered: "Give it to me and I will not betray your trust . . . I am the King's Treasurer." He was dressed in black, despite the appalling heat, and wore a heavy gold chain round his neck. On his head, a velvet cap which made him sweat heavily. He tore the seal and read the letter. "Sir Don Alonso," he said courteously, "you are my guest. Do not trouble about your horse and baggage. My men will see to that."

Passamonte lived on the main street, in one of the fine stone houses built by Governor Ovando in order, as he wrote to the King, "to ennoble the city." It was cool and scented with the aromatic woods

which panelled its inner walls. The garden was alight with oranges and lemons which shone on the rich, green background of their foliage. He gave the youngster an outline of the situation : there were two powerful magnets which drew the Spaniards away as soon as they landed, towards other lands—gold and conquest. Passamonte, however, thought that the best advice to be given to a newly arrived Spaniard was : stay and till the land. " I know," he added, " that a Visigoth was not born to handle the spade. But, thank God, there is no lack of Indian labour. We shall give you land and men. All you need do is to lead, command, take charge of the land and of the men, and persevere. You will have to sign on for five years, that is all."

" Sign for what? " asked Alonso.

" For citizenship here, which amounts to a promise not to leave us for five years to conquer islands and mainlands."

The young man kept silent. " You are thinking of gold ! " said Passamonte, well used to that disappointment. Alonso smiled enigmatically. " No. I am not . . . I do not intend to work for gold or to seek it in any way." The King's Treasurer could hardly believe his ears. Alonso went on : " I am only wondering whether farming and keeping cattle will—" He did not finish the sentence. The Treasurer was sympathetic. " I did not expect less than that from a Manrique. However, if you prefer fighting, you have an ample choice : the Island of St. John (he meant Puerto Rico) is still being fought over ; Cuba is being conquered as we speak." Alonso's eyes brightened. " But," added Passamonte, " I cannot say as an honest man that in these wars the Spaniards earn laurels comparable to those your ancestors won against the Moors ; these islanders are but poor fighters and they have no weapons to face our firearms. Think it over. If I were in your place, I would become a farmer first ; this would give me time to become familiar with conditions here and I would wait for a real war to add lustre to my name."

An Indian girl, clad with one single cotton garment very much like a sleeveless nightgown, her black hair hanging down her back, stole in barefoot, bringing a tray with cool orange and lemon drinks. Alonso glanced at her with the curiosity of one who sees something utterly new. Passamonte, an old bachelor who had the reputation of never having known a woman, noticed the glance but misinterpreted it. " Another curse of this island," he said, when the girl had left the room, " is the ease with which our men can procure any amount of women. It unmans many of them and poisons most of them with the venereal disease." Alonso kept silent. " If I tell him that I am not after women, after having told him that I am not after gold," he thought, " he is sure to take me for a humbug or a liar." Passamonte, meanwhile, thought he had touched at last on Alonso's soft spot. " My

years give me leave to advise you, Sir Don Alonso Manrique : keep off women, as I have done all my life."

By way of changing the subject, Alonso asked whether Hernán Cortés was in the town. Passamonte glanced at him sharply. Cortés had the reputation of being the most devastating woman-killer in the Indies. "No. He is not in the town, nor even in the island. He is gone with Diego Velázquez to conquer Cuba. Do you know him?" Alonso explained that he had letters for Cortés. "He is a fine farmer, one of our best. If only he left women alone!" And the old man shook his head.

3

Alonso spent a few weeks as the Treasurer's guest, to become acquainted with his new surroundings before deciding on a course of action. Passamonte put at his disposal a young Indian male servant as valet, groom and general helper, and an old Indian female as housekeeper, cook, seamstress and laundry woman. He expected some mild complaint or observation on the age and looks of the woman and was puzzled at having none. "What kind of a bird is this?" he asked himself. Alonso's fine physique, gait and manner were not such as to suggest an inborn dislike for women. Passamonte, himself a virile, yet a chaste man, was drawn to his guest by a sympathy which the caution of old age kept in check.

Alonso meanwhile was exploring the neighbourhood of Santo Domingo and improving his acquaintance with men and nature. He was growing more and more dissatisfied with what he saw, and his youthful, generous and well-meaning spirit suffered many a disappointment when he was able to measure the appalling distance between the facts he observed and the principles he had heard discussed in the monastery at home on the rights and duties of the Christians in the New World. He had grown out of the habit of discussing things ever since his disastrous experience in the seminary. He felt drawn to action and though he had not thought his principles out, he worked upon the rule that nothing but action can put action right. After a few weeks of ramblings across country, he asked Passamonte to enable him to settle somewhere and to give him some Indians to work his land. The Treasurer gave him a village with all its population. Alonso Manrique became a gentleman farmer.

He went at first through an exhilarating phase of creating endeavour, at the apex of authority in a community of over a thousand human beings. The Indians became much attached to him when they found him considerate and above all when they recovered from their

astonishment at his indifference towards both gold and women. They had made him a temporary wood and palm-leaf house, comfortable and quite presentable, on a knoll above the village. There Marionex, the old cacique, came one day to see him to show him the spot on the river where gold could be found and washed—not without labour—from the sand and pebbles of certain nooks or holes. But, contrary to his fears and expectations, Alonso did not proceed at once to organise the gold gangs to work for him in the broiling sun; he told Marionex that if any one found gold he could keep it on payment of the usual fifth for the King and the fifth for the owner. When the Indians heard this answer from the lips of Marionex, they began to wonder whether that Christian was not just a bit queer; but a bigger surprise was in store for them. Experience had taught the natives to offer women to the Spaniards before they took them indiscriminately. Moreover the caciques found little difficulty in selecting them, for the native women were fond of the Spaniards even when they were not as handsome as Alonso, being somewhat neglected by their indolent males. But lo! this queer Spaniard sent the women back to their homes.

So the next day old Marionex called on Alonso with a few young men neatly washed, painted and elaborately “hair-dressed” and “beauty-parloured,” whom in his lovable simplicity he came to offer to Alonso in view of the Christian’s rejection of the offer of women. Marionex discovered at last that Alonso’s eyes could flash with anger. He became red and his eyes glowed, and he poured a cataract of insults at Marionex, fortunately in Spanish. The cacique and his mignons fled, wondering what the Spaniard could be after, while Alonso calmed down and wondered at the pressure with which Antonio’s vocabulary had come out of him! He was not shocked. He was not ashamed. He was just surprised and even amused. “Where is he? I wonder . . .,” he thought, casting his mental eyes on his vanished companion.

From that day on the young gentleman farmer was universally liked by his Indians, with the exception of a small number of would-be Pompadours and Antinouses whom he had disappointed. He had a two-storied house built, made of wood and stone, a palace by local standards; he planted fields of cotton, maize and other rich crops and bought cows, sheep and pigs.

Things went on smoothly and, as he thought, happily. He was not much of an accountant and was not quite certain whether he was making much money—or even any. But he was not bent on money-making. He would ride amidst his Indians and over his fields feeling happy and contented—save for some curious urge in him which demanded more risk. Yet all was not as well as it seemed. Alonso’s neighbours were not pleased. He was spoiling the trade for them. Their Indians, overworked and underfed, could always point to

Alonso's farms as an example of how owners should behave. Alonso was unaware of this state of things. He had not organised his farming on humanitarian lines to serve as a model in the island. He had simply gone ahead as his good sense and feelings prompted, and had struck the right way empirically. He hardly knew his neighbours, whom he never saw. He had had a chapel built on the estate and had arranged for a priest to come and say Mass on Sundays. He himself had taken in hand the Christian education of his native folk, to which he devoted one hour a day. But though in this he was but fulfilling an obligation laid on all Christian settlers by the royal charter which granted them Indian labour, he was one of the five or six men in the whole island who took such an obligation in earnest—again unaware of this distinction and therefore of the ill feeling which it created amongst the callous settlers in his neighbourhood.

Complaints began to pour in at Santo Domingo, particularly into Passamonte's patient ears. Alonso was of course accused of ill-treating his Indians. He was represented as a kind of sultan before whom women found no respect. Passamonte was dumbfounded. It was what he least expected to hear about his young guest. But Alonso's enemies had carefully prepared their ground and had neglected nothing to give an air of plausibility to their calumnies. The disappointed girls had been made to participate in the conspiracy. They were all fond of Spaniards and knew how to find them or be found by them. They had all had adventures with Spaniards of neighbouring settlements, and some of them were big with child. Destiny is apt to weave the same patterns again and again in the life of a human being. This time Alonso, still chaste, was surrounded by a number of native Martas, though he knew nothing of it. Passamonte was a sedentary man. The stories of these girls were brought to him from afar. He could have proved them false by just going to see, but he remained in his comfortable quarters in town and was gradually coming round to the belief that young Alonso was a sly hypocrite who had deceived him with his well-simulated indifference to women, when he received a letter from Spain which clinched his conviction. He had asked his friends for information on young Manrique. "We gather," said one of his correspondents, "that the cause of his somewhat swift decision to leave this country and sail to the Indies was an unsavoury story: while studying for Holy Orders in Toledo, he killed a priest—some even say a teacher in his seminary—whom he discovered to be sharing with him the favours of the same woman."

Shortly after the arrival of this letter in Santo Domingo, Alonso happened to come to town and went to call on Passamonte. He found a different man. The Treasurer, once cordial and even affectionate, was now cold and sullen. "I am told," he said reproachfully, "that

you have Mass said on Sundays only, instead of every day as every Christian ought to do." Alonso did not expect this attack. "Sir, I attend to the Christian education of my Indians every day. The daily Mass is a devotion but not an obligation." The Treasurer frowned. "A very necessary and holy devotion, strictly observed in this island." Alonso was embittered by this remark. Why! He had the happiest and most contented lot of natives in the whole island, and now he was to stand condemned because he spared them the daily Mass! "Sir," he retorted somewhat petulantly, "in Santa Isabel the men are well paid and the women are respected." Passamonte looked up. Was this young libertine making fun of him? "Respected . . . by whom? My information is not to that effect. And if you . . . respect the women in your district, you must have changed a good deal since your Toledo days!"

The youth blushed red and his blue eyes flashed as they would in his moments of sudden anger. He did not take the wise course of explaining the facts, he could not take it. He was far too hot with fury against the insane world. "Sir," he said with haughtiness, "you are insulting me. Since you prefer base calumnies to the word of a gentleman, I have nothing more to say."

And he left the room of the most powerful man in the Island.

4

When he arrived in Santa Isabel he found a stranger waiting for his return, sitting calmly, with an air of being at home, on a rocking chair in front of the door. Alonso studied him curiously as he rode up the main avenue of palm and pine trees which led to his handsome house. The stranger's hair was grey, and so far as his looks were concerned, he might be about fifty; he was thin and sallow, even yellow-skinned; his eyes were hollow; on his neck there was no flesh left to mask the wiry tendons and bones; he stooped badly.

"Alonso!" He recognised the voice, though broken and husky. "Antonio!" And his voice and gesture were unable to conceal his emotion at seeing how quickly his friend had aged. "Yes. I know. Twenty years older in twenty months, eh? The cursed women, Alonso. Don't go near them. They carry a devilish pest in their womb. They call it the boobs. Have you heard of it? May God preserve you from it."

They went indoors and Alonso offered the hospitality of his house. "For as long as you like." Antonio smiled, showing a dilapidated row of teeth. "For ever, my dear boy. I am on the rocks. Not a maravedí.

in my purse. Not a drop of blood in my veins. Can't walk. Can't ride. Can't fight. Can't eat. Can't drink. Can't . . . h'm . . . a shadow, not a man! Have you any guayacan trees?" He was glad to hear that there were many in the estate. The guayacan was the standard cure for syphilis in the New World, and the patients knew that the best cures were obtained by boiling fresh twigs torn from the tree.

Antonio settled in Santa Isabel and began to recover slowly. He told Alonso his adventures, mostly in the feminine field, and how he had become an early casualty in this battle. He gave him news of young Esquivel, who had remained in the service of Hernán Cortés for a number of years and was then in Cuba with the expedition led by Velázquez. The ex-page of Cristóbal Colón, one of the oldest discoverers, since he had come over in the Santa Maria, cast a melancholy glance at his weak shaking body which prevented him from sharing in fights and conquests. "Curse the women," he said by way of comment. And he went on: "There is also the island of St. John." He seemed to be pursuing an underground thread of thought. "A lot of fighting there; of course one gets a bit of fighting here now and then, but nothing to satisfy a young healthy man like you!"

"What kind of fighting does one get here?" asked Alonso.

"I dare say you'll soon find out. Now and then a band of Caribbean Islanders land from nowhere. They are human flesh eaters and fight with poisoned arrows. Otherwise an amiable lot."

"What do they come for?"

"Meat! They take the boys, castrate them and fatten them. They lie with the women and eat the offspring. They kill the men but do not eat them. Too tough, I suppose."

"They can't come as far as this place," observed Alonso.

"No. But you would not leave your sea-shore neighbours in the lurch, let alone the fun of the fight. And by the way they don't seem to like you very much, your neighbours. You must put that right."

"What is wrong with me? They have hardly seen me."

"They have felt you, though . . . Have you any tobacco?" he asked suddenly.

"What!" cried out Alonso, really shocked, "Have you taken to that low native vice?" Antonio grinned and, with the utmost satisfaction, answered, "I have! The only one left me! Get me some!" Alonso called a native servant. "Bring some tobacco leaves for this gentleman and have them nicely rolled for him."

"Ah, yes! About your neighbours. To begin with, you spoil these Indian dogs."

"But——" Alonso did not know how to express his indignation. Antonio interrupted him, "Now, Alonso, no nonsense, please. They are dirty dogs, the whole lot of them, and you know it. Sodomites, liars, lazy, oh my God, lazy . . . and their women, all whores. . . ."

"So are all women everywhere in your opinion!" put in Alonso. Antonio warded off the argument with the palm of his hand: "There are whores and whores, my dear boy. You must live in this world and not in your dreams. You must make these dogs work for you. Treat them well, of course, mind you, I disagree with their intrigues——"

"Whose?" asked Alonso, who was at some pains to follow the wanderings of his friend's thoughts. "I mean those fellows settled round you. That man Eguilaz, the Biscayan . . . I know him well. He is not bad you know? He means no harm, but he has got his knife in you, the old miser, because he does not give any wages at all to his labourers, just food—not much of it, at that; and I am sure he is the man who goes about with tales about you and your girls——"

"What girls?"

Antonio laughed. "Well, I am not going to bark at you for that. You are no monk . . . now. And the girls seem to like it, to judge by the proud way they show their swollen bellies! This time, you won't be able to say it was I who did it!"

"What are you talking about?" asked Alonso, "I have not touched an Indian woman . . . nor any woman in my life, do you hear? I have my reasons, and they are my own."

Antonio was dumbfounded and pained. "Alonso, you must. For the honour of your name! If you treat your Indians as if they were Christians and on top of that you do not lie with the women, who will believe you are a man?"

Alonso felt a torrent of words, thoughts and emotions, rushing impetuously to his mouth. He moved to speak, but he subsided into a sullen silence. What was the good of explaining? The world was a hopeless place and nothing but contempt and silence were fit for it. "Here," he said coldly, taking from the native the rolled, aromatic cigar, "take the only vice you have left, and enjoy it."

5

A few days later they were lounging on rocking chairs by the front door, under the shade of the porch. A horse suddenly turned the corner of the alley galloping towards them. "Hallo!" cried Antonio, "that is Eguilaz's mare . . . and his negro too."

The negro pulled hard, the horse stopped, breathing like a forge,

its sides still panting, shining all over with sweat. The negro leaped down: "Master sends hurry. Caribbeans landed. Too many for him. Ask help."

Alonso glanced at Antonio who had not moved from his easy chair. "Can you take charge of Santa Isabel?" he asked. "Well . . . yes, of course. The Caribbeans will not come so far. . . ." Alonso gave him a few hurried explanations and instructions, bade his native servant to bring his weapons and horse and rode off away followed by the negro.

They galloped for a long time till they came upon the Eguilaz estate. The natives had fled inland as soon as they had seen the dreaded canoes. Eguilaz was holding the house with his Spanish steward and a handful of negro slaves. A swarm of terrifying savages, so elaborately painted in black, red and white patterns, that, though stark naked, they seemed dressed in tight-fitting garments, was shouting, yelling and shooting volleys of arrows. They were too noisy and too intent to notice the new arrival. Alonso galloped right into them, paying no attention to the shouts of caution which came from his negro companion. He caught a Caribbean warrior by a tuft of hair which, very much like the spike of a helmet, he wore as a warlike adornment, and lifting him from the ground, let him fall heavily at the foot of the negro's horse. Eguilaz, his steward and his negroes were astonished at the feat. Alonso repeated it once, twice, three times. The men he knocked down were promptly killed or seriously wounded by the negro rider with a heavy, iron-headed stick. The besieged took courage, made a sortie and killed or wounded some of the Caribbeans nearest to them. But the chief of the invaders, who proudly wore a tuft of hair twice as long as the others, realised the position and took upon himself to attack the newcomer. He leapt upwards and hung on to Alonso's waist with his left arm, while with his right he tried to thrust a long fishbone knife—a formidable weapon—into the horse. Alonso saw it just in time to avoid the blow by a swift movement of his mount, while he himself drew and with a powerful stroke of his sword, disarmed the ferocious Indian. But in so doing, he disarmed himself as well, for the sword fell from his hand. The Indian tried to disengage himself in order to get possession of that prized trophy, but Alonso held his neck firmly down and the warrior, going back to that nature from which he had departed but little, drove his sharp teeth into his enemy's leg. Fury and pain made Alonso press his enemy's head harder and harder, and deeper and deeper went the teeth. Alonso drove his spurs into the horse's flank, and the animal went off at a violent gallop. The actual fighting on the estate died out. The Negro had handed over his horse to Eguilaz who started off to the rescue of his gallant ally.

But Alonso had an idea. He was heading towards the river, and before the Caribbean knew what was happening, Alonso had plunged into the water, where the hot horse trembled with pleasure and relief, holding his enemy's face firmly under the quiet, cool, flow, which calmed his own wound and gradually released the cruel fangs which had caused it, till lifeless, the whole body, paint, tuft and all, glided down to the sandy bottom.

Alonso looked up. "By the Lord St. James," said a smiling, admiring, soldierly face, "Sir Don Alonso Manrique, you are a man!"

6

He rode slowly home in the broiling sun. He would not accept a meal, nor a siesta, nor a rest from his grateful, and possibly remorseful neighbour. He longed to be home, not so much to meet Antonio again and report the events of the day, as to be alone and to find out exactly what was happening to him. Trees, flowers, humming birds, parrots were lucky. They had but to be. But men . . . Did men ever know what happened to them, what they did and why they did it? Why had he, Alonso Manrique, gambled his life to rescue that Eguilaz who was ill-treating his Indians and robbing him of his honour and reputation? Yes, why? For, of all explanations, the most Christian, that he had rushed to the help of the needy in a love-thy-neighbour spirit, would do least. No. He felt sure that his chief impulse when he had galloped away from Santa Isabel had not come from his mother's soft world, nor even from the prior's hard-soft-world, but from the hard world of his father and of Antonio, aye, from that world which held that all men are rascals and that all women are—well, never mind what it held. He had felt the exhilaration of the fight in him, and that scene in the forecourt of Eguilaz's house had undoubtedly been the happiest in his life.

How many Visigothic warriors, how many Arab chiefs from the long vistas of his blood-past had rejoiced in it with him, had been thrilled by the joy of a few instants of danger lived again in his youthful and virile body, while in their beings, stilled for so long, they felt again the stir of that wave of life come to quicken them for a brief span? As he rode home at the leisurely step of his horse, despite the tense pain of his wounded leg, Alonso sank into those deep spaces of inner enjoyment which, he obscurely realised, stretched beyond the borders of his individual reason and observation. "Well," he mused, "we have had a good time!" And that "we" was spoken to a legion in his being, even though he knew it not.

He slowed down. It was late ; he had had no food since breakfast. He was tired, hungry and in need of some kind of dressing for his wounded thigh. But he slowed down. He did not want to arrive home, or at any rate, something or somebody in him was reluctant to arrive home. The mood had changed. His solitude, his meditation were more precious to him than the satisfaction of his physical needs, and made him linger on the way. He had, in fact, enjoyed a most fruitful solitary moment of company with himself. But the house . . . He did not mind Antonio. What repelled him was the whole round of daily duties and activities which the house incarnated. . . . Every day the same ! . . . Why did the idea overwhelm him now ? Things were going so well in Santa Isabel. Everybody was happy ; the crops were good ; he would soon be wealthy. He was expecting more cows and merino ewes from Spain . . . Why did he feel that sudden aversion for the happy house he had built for himself !

Antonio received him with the utmost curiosity. He wanted to hear the news at once. But Alonso made him wait. He lay down on his hammock and bade his servant bring the native medicine-man and to see that the horse had a good rest. The native healer was an old man with a kindly smile and suave gestures. He was astonished at the depth of the wound caused by the Caribbean's teeth. He applied to it a paste which he made in his mouth with herbs from an elaborate bag, full of little inner bags of different colours, and he strongly advised against walking out in full-moon nights for a whole year—for the full-moon held great enmity against wounds caused by human teeth, as everybody knew of course.

The healer left and Alonso sat down to a hearty meal. Antonio followed the story which he longed to hear with a passionate interest, and when at last he came to the river scene with Eguilaz : " I am glad," he said with genuine pleasure. " I am glad. That will teach them a lesson, though, of course," he added, " it were better if you dropped that foolishness about women." Alonso smiled. " You want me to catch the boobs like you ? " Antonio returned the smile with sadness.

Suddenly, out of the blue, Alonso asked, " How would you like to take charge here for good ? " " How do you mean . . . under you ? " " No. Suppose I went away . . . for a long time . . . " Antonio fastened his eyes on the young Manrique. " Ah," he said, " you've tasted blood. The hound has a good pedigree. You are no sheep dog, my boy."

Then Alonso understood why he had lost all pleasure in farming.

7

Everything and everybody conspired from that day on to drive Alonso to a life of adventure. His neighbours, longing to get rid of him, changed their tactics and spread far and wide his reputation as a soldier and a would-be leader of men. Passamonte, who did not like his free way with women (for he still thought of him as a woman-killer) would have been delighted to see him sail away towards some wilder regions, leaving Santa Isabel—the irony of it!—to Antonio, whom women had brought to such a sorry condition. As for Antonio himself, he had cast many an ambitious eye on the beauty, order, wealth and comfort of the estate of which he would become the master, in fact if not in law, on the day Alonso took to sea; for the settlers with more experience than young Manrique knew full well how seldom a man who sailed westwards ever came back to his cows and pigs—if he succeeded in his westward adventures, because it was not worth while to return; if he failed, because that kind of failure always meant death.

Alonso was thinking of little else than this longing for some westward flight. On that day when he had fought for Eguilaz, something had stirred in him which would not be quieted down. The urge, the forward march which had driven his blood on that day, had come from far-off gallops on the plains of northern Germany and the oases of Arabia, which had met on the crossways of Spain—and it was now beating in his heart, forcing him to seek a free and unlimited space for his youthful life in the still unexplored regions of the New World.

One afternoon, in the autumn, as he was leisurely riding through the estate with Antonio, at the quiet, slow pace which Antonio could afford, he saw a man riding towards them. "God be with you," said the stranger piously, "I suppose you are my lord Don Alonso Manrique. I come with a message from your friends in the town." They rode home together. The messenger was a gentleman from Santo Domingo whose brother had left in the spring, in a caravel with forty men, to explore the coast of the mainland. No one had yet returned. He came with a proposal that Alonso—of whose courage and qualities every one spoke so highly—should take command of a rescue ship which was being armed for the purpose. There might be money in it for the land to be explored was rich in pearl fisheries. No money was required of him, but he could, if he wished, share in the outlay and in the profits.

Antonio was all for it. But Alonso was in need of no encouragement. He took the matter up at once and, leaving Antonio in charge, rode the next morning to Santo Domingo. Within a week the deal

had been concluded and duly written down in verbose legalese at the offices of the Royal Treasurer. Alonso was to be the captain of the expedition and take half the shares of it. He provided one hundred sides of bacon from his farms, as well as large quantities of cassabe bread. But though he paid due attention to these material details, his heart was in the military side of the enterprise. He fell in love with "his" caravel, the *Holy Cross*, and knew every nook and corner of her. He selected his men carefully, took three horses on board, there being room for no more, and was at some pains to find a good pilot, not an easy thing, for good pilots were in keen demand.

When everything was ready, he went back to Santa Isabel to impart his last instructions to Antonio. He impressed on his friend his strong desire that the natives should be well and fairly treated, should be paid a living wage, no matter what other settlers might say, and allowed time to till their own plots of land; but above all, that they should be given Christian tuition every day. "Who's going to do that?" asked Antonio, "I am no scholar and have not studied in a seminary!" Alonso saw the point. "You will have to do something. Get the priest to come over from St. Mary's, or something. If I do not come back and you have to give up all hope of seeing me again, you will open the sealed paper in the strong box and write to my father and mother."

They rode away together to the edge of the estate. Antonio was not yet in a condition to see him off in Santo Domingo; they parted there and Antonio rode back, arrived in the comfortable house, cool and scented with the aroma of tropical woods, and sat down to a glass of orangeade. He noticed a special respect in all the native staff. They realised that for a long time, possibly for good and all, he would be the master.

8

One morning, late in September, 1515, the *Holy Cross* sailed away. Alonso's plan was to sail along the southern coast of the island, passing between Jamaica and Cuba and keeping a western course roughly on the 20th degree till he struck land, then to follow the coast of that land which he assumed would be Terra-Firma, till he came upon the lost expedition. His pilot had assured him that this was the safest course in that part of the year.

The first phase of the voyage was a delight. The weather was glorious, the sea had spread all its charm, and was as shiny, silky, sinuous and sensuous as a serpent stretching all over its surface; life glided along itself without longing or nostalgia. Nothing happened;

nothing was needed. Alonso lived in a dream of bliss and all his queries on life had been dissolved in the transparent green of the water by the light and empty hand of time. But as the pilot came closer and closer to the westernmost end of Cuba, this mood changed from fair to variable and later to overcast. Every now and then a gust of hot wind made the caravel leap forward or sideways, much to the discomfort of the soldiers on board. The sky turned dark and took on an ominous, metallic hue and, finally, a violent storm of wind and rain fell with the utmost fury on the graceful and fragile ship.

There was nothing to be done but to dance to the tune of the wind. On deck, drenched with sky and sea water, the pilot shouted to Alonso: "Sir Captain, my only comfort is that there is nothing to the north and this is a dead south wind." They ran northwards without sails for a distance which they could not reckon and for a time which seemed to them akin to eternity. Day and night were nearly alike in point of darkness and whatever light there was had turned aggressive and fiendish, shining only in spasms of purple, explosive energy, more terrifying than illuminating. The sailors went about praying and the soldiers swearing; the animals were terror stricken, the horses kicked and neighed violently. The stone balls of ammunition for the one cannon which Alonso had taken on board rolled within the hull, pounding its shaky sides violently, while, with an appalling frequency, the waves slashed the flanks of the caravel making the whole frame vibrate every time for long afterwards.

After two days and a night of this unbearable tension, the pilot noticed that the wind had changed from south to east. This was even worse. The caravel might still be opposite the mainland. Who could tell? He did not know where he was; nor could he find out, for there was no sun, there were no stars to be seen. At dawn, he found he was drifting fast towards the west. It seemed to him that to the south far out on the horizon, some sort of a line might well be a coast, perhaps the "island" of Yucatan, as it was then believed to be. But visibility was too low for any one to tell with certainty, and as for going to see, it would have been to court death. On they drifted, helpless.

Suddenly, in the dark west, a huge mass rushed towards them. "To the boats," shouted the pilot. There was a moment of frantic activity on board, then a crash. Alonso was in the water. The caravel had disappeared. Something black and bulky was rising and falling near him. He managed to grasp it with his hand. He recognised the ship's boat. He lifted himself and fell inside like a mass of lead. Presently—how long after, he was never able to say—he sat up and found he was alone. He seized two oars, and looked around. There was nothing to be seen. "Strange!" he thought. But after a while he began to notice things. He headed for the first dark form he saw in

the distance ; it was a broken plank from the ship's deck ; close to it an empty cask was dancing on the water ; but a rope attached to it seemed to him now and then pulled by some human will ; he waited for the next pull ; a man emerged from the waters, lying on his back. Alonso succeeded in reaching him with his oar which the shipwrecked sailor grasped frantically and, after a brisk struggle with the sea, Nuño Quintero set foot at last on the boat.

Alonso was glad, for Quintero was one of the most robust sailors in the ship. He wasted no time in words, shook the water off his thick, black mane and beard, and seized a couple of oars. " Let us make for land ! " he shouted. " Let us look for more men ! " retorted Alonso. " No good, sir. All gone down. I was nearly drowned and was by far the strongest of the lot. The bloody boat snapped at the last moment before any one could get into it." Alonso, however, forced him to remain for a time on the spot, then reluctantly gave up the search.

The sun had pierced the heavy clouds and finally dissolved them, but the sea was rough. There seemed to be a struggle of strong currents in that corner ; the two men could see the land, green and pleasant and incredibly quiet in itself, though constantly rising and falling in their eyes. They rowed vigorously for over an hour. As they came closer to the land, the sea became more violent and the waves rose and fell with a more formidable rhythm. Suddenly, when they thought they were at the end of their labours, a huge wave lifted them into space and thrust them furiously out of the boat, clean into the air.

9

Alonso came to, feeling a strong pain in his back. He was lying on his back and his hands were resting on wet, sandy soil. He sat up, not without difficulty, for his whole body ached ; then rose to his feet. Quintero was lying motionless a few yards away. He went up to him and called him by his name. Quintero opened his eyes ; his hands grasped the earth, and he leapt on to his feet with incredible agility : " S'blood ! We're saved ! "

Alonso was grieved. " Is that the way you thank God ? " Quintero shrugged his shoulders. He was alive and he was not at the Mass, so why not swear ? They looked round for the boat. They found it, or rather broken pieces of it, on a rocky stretch nearby and were overjoyed to discover that a good part of the food-stores had been saved, though some of it was too soaked in sea water to be eaten. Withal, they found a big piece of bacon, dry within its packing of tarred sail-

cloth, some biscuit-bread and a leather bottle full of wine. They sat on the dry rock, under the broiling sun and they ate and drank their fill.

Quintero fell asleep. Alonso lay on his back and wondered. All the men in the caravel had perished but Quintero and he. Was it sheer luck? "Of course not!" answered Father Guzmán in the debating hall of his inner self, "There is no luck. There is only Providence. Everything is done with a purpose." So said the Prior within, while without, Quintero snored vigorously. Alonso glanced at the blue, lofty, perfect sky and wondered. He was in an unknown land, naked but for his black breeches; had no weapons and hardly any food. Was all that meant, or had he been just granted a little more leisure before dying so that he could prepare his soul for the ordeal? What if he had landed amongst cannibals? Quintero snored again. At any rate, happen what may, there he was alone, really alone save for his companion, with no help, no hope of help, nothing but his own resource—and God. Quintero snored powerfully.

It was a kind of spirited *coda* to his sonorous slumber. The rough sailor woke up, leapt to his feet, slapped himself vigorously, and loudly announced: "The first whore-daughter I come across, down she goes!"

Alonso felt the insult, for he was the captain and Quintero was a common sailor. But where was the caravel, where the world in which they both had played their parts? Nothing drove his plight home to him so much as that sudden collapse of the system of relations between him and his companion. He said nothing at first, feeling so far removed from Quintero that there was nothing he could say. Yet, out of sheer need of companionship, and perhaps no doubt also prompted by his sense of leadership, he suggested: "Let us collect all we can out of the wreckage and walk inland in search of people." Quintero followed him. They found very little food to take away; there was still some wine in the leather bottle. Quintero improvised a shoulder-strap with some rope, slung the packet of food and the bottle over his shoulder and said: "Ready."

They followed a track across the brushwood. It was very hot. The sand seemed to stretch inland for a considerable distance, with patches of a dry, thorny, sturdy vegetation, low and sparse. On they walked for over an hour in an easterly direction, for they had landed on a coast facing west. Suddenly they came upon a woman who was gathering something, they could not see what. She was of a darker colour than the islanders of Santo Domingo and was naked. She heard their steps, looked up and was so astonished at the sight of the strangers that she stood there paralysed with a holy terror, believing them to be gods. Quintero leapt with joy. "She's mine," he cried out. "Don't touch her!" shouted Alonso. "To hell with you," roared back

Quintero. Both ran forward, Quintero to assault the woman, Alonso to prevent him. But Quintero thrust his foot out and tripped him up, then gave him a kick with his boot on the back of the head. Alonso lost consciousness.

The young Indian girl saw the hirsute, black-haired god knock down and, as she thought, kill the golden-haired one. She waited, fascinated by the strange sight and expecting some extraordinary revelation; for she was a virgin, as Quintero might have guessed had he known the habits of the Totonacs, since she wore no sex-cloth. The black-haired god came towards her, put his arm round her neck, made her lie on the sand and possessed her. She liked it. He also. He lay with her in peace for a while, and possessed her again. Then they both went away arm in arm towards the village.

IO

It was a small settlement of Totonac Indians on the coast of what now is known as Mexico, built of wooden bills and palm-leaves on the edge of a small river. They were soon surrounded by men, women and children. The girl said nothing and now and then smiled at the black-haired god, with whom she walked on, arm in arm. He welcomed this smile, not for motives of sentiment, to which he was impervious, but for motives of fear. He was a thickly incarnated man, with no powers of intuition and just the bare minimum of reason to carry him through life as a biped. But his instinct was the more awake, and some obscure sense in the depth of his robust body told him that there was far too much order about in that settlement for him to be safe after the liberties he had taken with that girl. His modicum of reason added to this fear, for he gauged his situation by analogy with his native land and knew full well that if a stranger landed near Palos and forced a girl in the neighbourhood of the town, he would be courting the gallows were he to walk afterwards into the town arm in arm with her. The crowd, nevertheless, seemed more curious than either friendly or angry, and so Quintero swayed between fear and confidence as he walked on. The girl led him on through the labyrinth of huts till they arrived at the biggest house in the settlement—the living and official residence of the chief.

This chief, Ocutli by name, was a tall, well-built warrior, of about forty, lithe, sinewy, and matter-of-fact. His lower lip was adorned with a piece of copper set in a hole bored through it, but he was admired for the sobriety of his elegance, and in particular for his refusal to wear any metal or stone ornaments on his nose.

The girl called his name from the doorstep and he came out. There was a crowd outside, and close to him, the girl and the black-haired god.

"Ocutli," said the girl, "I was gathering wool-flowers from the sand dunes when two gods suddenly sprang from the sand before me : this one and another one whose hair is made of gold. They fought. This one killed the other. Then he possessed me twice. And I brought him to you."

Ocutli said, "The gold-haired one cannot have been a god. You; you and you," and he pointed out three men in the crowd, "go back and find him for me. Taitla will tell you the spot. This god shall be honoured by us."

Quintero grinned, unable to realise what was going on. He was trying to be amiable, fearing that the girl was reporting him and that he would die on the gallows—for he had not expected to find so much organisation with so few clothes. Suddenly, he struck on an idea : he seized his wine bottle, took off the stopper and squeezed the skin, thus allowing the wine to overflow into a circular wooden goblet which surrounded the spout and, after drinking first, offered it to Ocutli. The chief drank and, after tasting the wine, doubted not that the stranger was of a divine nature. "Let us lead the Lord to the temple and provide a dwelling for him," he said to the girl and he added : "You, Taitla, must live with him and be his woman."

II

A procession was formed. It was led by a priest, who wore a black gown and whose mane of black hair was thick with the dust and blood of many years of human sacrifices. He carried in his hand a wooden spoon with copal incense and was followed by an acolyte, a youngster of about fifteen, naked, who carried a bag of maguey-thorns and a pouch of holy tobacco. Behind them went a slave caught in war, crowned with paper and wearing a paper shield. He was the victim to be offered to the god, that is to Quintero. Then a row of four black-robed priests. Then the god himself. Then Taitla. Then Ocutli. Then the crowd.

They all filed into the teocalli, while the priests and the acolyte sang a monotonous chant of thanksgiving ; and, while the crowd stayed below, the five priests, the acolyte, the victim, the god and his girl, and the chief climbed the steep steps of the temple to the upper platform where the sacrifice was to be performed. Every now and then the priests drove their maguey-thorns into the victim's body to force him to climb on.

The chief priest officiated. He made Quintero sit under an image of an ogre-like god, with a mask of blue stones on his forbidding face, and addressed him a long speech which the black-bearded god heard with feelings of dismay, his black eyes glued on a terrific knife of shiny black obsidian which the young acolyte had just produced from nowhere in particular. The only feature in the situation which put some confidence into the terrified god was the even more terrified paper-crowned victim who in a dejected mood waited for his coming end. The sermon was long—for the long-windedness of sermons is the only feature common to all religions—yet even a sermon must come to an end, and as the monotonous voice died out, the victim was quickly seized by the four priests, cast on the sacrificial stone lying on his back, and held there while the chief priest, knife in hand, prepared to open his chest in order to extract the heart and offer the blood to Quintero—while Quintero looked on ever so pleased to see that it was the other man and not he who was to be sacrificed. . . .

But as the priest's arm was shaking murderously in mid-air, gathering for its dark and deadly deed all the momentum which it was wont to gain from generations of blood-worshippers, the legion of soft-hearted, Christian women who for centuries past had been kneeling before the image of the Mother and Child in the churches of Palos, moved in the depths of Quintero's dark soul; their forward move was slow at first, for the paths of that soul were overgrown with a sturdy, thorny, thick-leaved vegetation, and the legion of sweet mothers took time, so much time that some wondered whether they would not be too late. . . . Quintero rose from his seat, seized the priest's arm and squeezed his wrist with such terrific force that the knife fell on the slabs and broke in tiny bits.

Utter amazement seized every one. Such a thing had never been seen. Priests, victim, god, girl and chief came down the steps of the teocalli, all but Quintero talking volubly over the unheard-of miracle. Why was the victim unacceptable to the new god? A mystery which the god would not explain. Ocutli gave orders that the best living quarters in the teocalli should be given over to Quintero and Taitla, and that the ex-victim should be set free.

Taitla had explained to the three men the spot she knew well. There was no mistaking it. The landmarks were numerous and every one in the settlement knew where it was. The three men spent a long time there, searching the neighbourhood with a care and a zeal

stimulated by the knowledge that Ocutli had a rough way with people who disappointed him. But the stranger could not be found. The spot on which he had lain was indeed found, for the brushwood showed traces of his body—and a tall man he was, observed one of the searchers—as well as traces of blood. But he could not be found, and so the three scouts made up their minds to return. One of them, however, had an idea: "Ocutli will not be pleased. There is no saying what Ocutli will do when he is not pleased. He might have us beaten, sentenced to death or quietly sold to the Mexicans for food in exchange for three Tlaxcatecs for his own larder. So, this is my proposal: we did see the stranger. But as we ran towards him, he rose in the air and melted into the blue sky." He waited, then explained: "You see, every one is in doubt as to whether he is a god or not. And after all, Taitla is positive he had blue eyes." They agreed. Then the mover of the proposal had it formally adopted, that is, from his maxtlatl he produced a maguey-thorn, pricked himself and his two comrades, mixed the three bloods with a pinch of sand and, dividing the cake into three parts, performed with his fellow conspirators a kind of communion.

They then returned, told the story and were believed. And thus was another saint added to Heaven without depleting the earth of any sinner.

13

Alonso opened his eyes, heavy with pain. Pain everywhere, but the most acute of all at the back of his head. He gradually forced his reluctant body to sit up. He shivered. There was blood on the sand. He rose to his feet. He was hot and thirsty. In his imagination, he saw the mouth of a river which rose and fell on the horizon while he was struggling with the waves in the boat. He moved towards that river along the coast. He had not walked long when he came to a river—the same or another one, who could tell?—and he decided to bathe. This might well have been the last decision of his life, for the river was infested with caymans, but as he was going to leap into the water, he was seized from behind by so many arms that he thought for an instant he had fallen into the hands of some many-armed giant. He soon found himself firmly though not roughly laid down at the bottom of a canoe, while several natives sat on benches across his legs and pulled vigorously at their oars, and another one, their chief, held his head motionless between his bare, strong feet.

Alonso was not in a position to react in any way. He was exhausted, feverish and delirious. Soon after the canoe was set in motion

by his captors, he began to speak aloud with the utmost rapidity and fluency, in a quick succession of passionate harangues addressed now to his father, now to his mother, to the prior, to the Boar, the Cardinal, Passamonte, Antonio, every one in fact who had played a part in his life. The natives listened with a religious awe. They were also Totonacs, of a settlement and tribe in perpetual war with those ruled by Ocutli. They lived on the other side of the river, but used to cross over stealthily at times, to poach in their rival's territory, and were fishing on Ocutli's bank when they saw the strange gold-haired apparition. They knew that the rich monarchs of the lofty lagoon, Moteczuma, the emperor of Mexico-Tenochtitlan and Nezawal Pilli, the king of Tetzcuco, were eager to acquire human oddities and ready to pay for them in gold, precious stones, feathers, maize or cotton wraps. Their duty towards Chichoatl, their chief, was therefore to get hold of the stranger and they had promptly and successfully acted on it.

They were not particularly devout or even given to thinking in religious terms, or else they might have hesitated before attacking such a strange vision; but when lying in their canoe, he began to pour forth more words per minute than they—a somewhat taciturn race—could utter in a day, they felt uncomfortable. Some of the oarsmen suggested that the skipper should let go his feet, but the skipper, not daring to speak lest the stranger caught his intention, held lips and feet tight, thinking that, god or man, the golden-haired prisoner would be too dangerous on the water, if free. They rowed on, Alonso in his garrulous delirium, the natives in their silent fears, till they arrived in their settlement, a big village of wooden huts built partly inland, partly on the water. The canoe was brought to a standstill at a landing stage in front of a long row of huts. One of the oarsmen ran in. Chichoatl appeared on the threshold.

He was a man of about fifty, naked but for a bright red loincloth, and elaborately painted all over with red, blue and white designs. He wore three necklaces of shells. "Bring him in," he ordered. But Alonso did not move. The skipper passed his hand under the head and an oarsman passed his under the knees, and the limp body was thus landed and laid down on a couch of cotton wraps in Chichoatl's hall.

The chief passed his hand all over the body of his prisoner. He was a connoisseur, and every one present could see that he thought highly of his new acquisition. "There is a lot of meat here," he said at last, "and it must taste good. In nature," he added, turning to his audience with a philosophic eye, "white meats are always the choicest and the healthiest. When one of us is sick, the omen-reader always gives him hen to eat, or some such white

meat as fish. This man will make most delicate food. And there is a lot of it."

"Moteczuma or Nezawal Pilli would pay a cargo of maize for him, though," timidly put in one of the onlookers.

"To hell with them," spiritedly retorted Chicoatl, "we shall enjoy this banquet ourselves. And that is final. Call the omen-reader in. He must cure him, or else, tell him that we will throw him to the caymans with all his pictures and his herbs. Once this fellow is on his feet again, to the wooden jail with him till he is fat and ready for the pot."

14

Alonso's illness lasted for weeks. Every day that went by made more precarious the life of the omen-reader who acted as a doctor for the community and whose herbs, powders and incantations, inoffensive enough, were equally ineffective to injure or to improve Alonso's health. Every week also Chicoatl's face became longer and more solemn, as he saw the flesh of his prospective victim melt away. Yet, though thin and emaciated, Alonso pulled through and, after weeks in the dark hut, found himself at last in the open air, convalescing in his jail.

It was a curious construction, more like a cage than like a jail proper; in the shape of a hut, save that the sides consisted merely of the chief wooden props which supported the roof, without the panelling of smaller wooden pieces and palm-leaves which closed and finished up the walls of an ordinary hut. It was built partly on land, partly over the river and was so spacious that it could easily have provided accommodation for several scores of prisoners without undue discomfort to any of them. At the time, there was only one other prisoner in it, a native whom Alonso noticed at once as belonging to a different type, of a lighter hue. He had an aquiline nose and an exceptionally long face.

Alonso was served a big plate of maize porridge every two hours, with no other respite than a fairly long stretch of night when he was allowed to sleep. He had no conception of what was in his captors' mind and had given himself a few weeks' rest before attempting to regain his liberty, if such a thing were possible. But as his body began to recuperate, his natural mental sharpness revived. He was much interested in his companion and in particular, in a trick he had of getting rid of as much food as he could without drawing the attention of those who brought it to him. This discovery, which Alonso made on the third day of his imprisonment, intrigued him greatly. The

porridge—a thick paste to be eaten with one's fingers—had been brought in, and both had begun to eat, but Alonso noticed that the native prisoner did not really eat it, but moved always the same morsel up and down from plate to mouth, covering the plate with his head, while the guard looked on from above; till the guard, bored, moved away and the prisoner promptly threw all the food into the water and calmly waited till the plate was taken away.

The next day the native prisoner repeated the action and, not content with throwing his food into the water, threw away Alonso's food as well. He then proceeded to explain to Alonso, with a profusion of gestures, that they were being fed in order to be fattened, so as to be eaten; and that it was in their interest that the fattening operations should take as much time as possible. Alonso tumbled to the meaning of it all and was then able to realise how serious his position was. He felt a kind of fellowship between himself and his companion and gradually learned to understand what he said. He did not speak the same language as their captors. Little by little Alonso acquired some vocabulary of his companion's speech and was able to form sentences. His mind, well-trained in linguistic gymnastics by his early experiences in Hebrew and Arabic, absorbed with relative ease both the Totonac which his guard spoke to him and the Nauatl in which he conversed with his companion.

He soon realised—not without some amusement—that his companion's name was Long Face. Long Face, for he it was, had had a chequered career during the ten years which had elapsed since he had sold himself for a handful of cocoa-almonds. He had passed through practically every slave-market between Tlaxcala and the coast, and had finally escaped from his latest master only to fall into the hands of a Totonac chief who happened to be a gourmet. He was, of course, determined to escape from this fastidious master also, and one night, after elaborate precautions, he made Alonso touch the spot, hidden under the earth, where, with an Asiatic patience, he had sawn the beam nearly across. "How do you do that?" whispered Alonso in admiration. Long Face showed him a string of henequen and some sand; with the motion of the string, he rubbed the sand into the wood. He knew that the process was slow, but he also knew that it was sufficient to cut through even a bar of metal. The Mexican and the Spaniard became fellow conspirators. Long Face's plan was first to gain time by keeping thin and too unappetising for Chicoatl's dainty taste; then, to saw through two beams; then to slip into the river one dark night, despite the danger of the caymans which he was inclined to rate fairly low in that season and on a spot so high up the river; and, finally, to take refuge somewhere in the mountainous regions, away from all settlements till they had thought out a plan for

returning safely to Tetzcuco, where he was sure his new friend would be well received and would even help to restore him to favour in spite of the unsavoury circumstances of his departure.

Progress was rapid in all that concerned the most difficult part of their plan : the sawing of the planks. Alonso became an expert at it and the two beams were ready to be shoved aside by any powerful man, such as they both were, leaving enough space for them to escape. All that was wanted was a moonless night. Suddenly, the plan was ruined and the whole course of events altered by the arrival of three most imposing and haughty personages.

15

They appeared before the cage one sunny morning, when the two prisoners were keenly watching for favourable signs to effect their escape. They were three proud Mexicans, wearing their hair tied high on top of the head in a straight tuft from which elaborate feather-ornaments hung low on their backs. Their faces were slightly painted, which made their rich brown skins redder than nature warranted ; their upper lips were adorned with blue feathers which hung from stones inserted through their nose partitions ; and they were clad in rich cotton wraps clasped on the right shoulder by copper brooches. They carried cane-sticks with golden tops, not as walking sticks but ceremoniously, as wands of office. Behind each of them a servant carried a huge feather-fan to cool his master's head. Chicoatl, who accompanied them, looked somewhat subdued.

They glanced at Alonso with a concentrated interest and at Ixtlicoyu with frigid contempt. Alonso realised that they were Mexicans as soon as he heard them speak. Though his knowledge of the Nauatl language was not yet great, he was able to follow the general trend of what was said and from the first feigned not to understand.

"This man," said the chief of the visitors, "must belong to the vanguard of Quetzalcoatl. I have heard Moteczuma say that the return of the Plumed Serpent must occur soon and probably during his reign. Let us send him a portrait of this portent by a speedy messenger and then the portent himself will follow." His companions agreed. They were tax-gatherers or *calpixques* sent by Moteczuma to collect the tribute which he exacted from the semi-independent tribes on the coast.

"Who are you?" asked the chief of them with a glassy eye on Long Face.

"I am . . . a Mexican," answered Nezawal Pilli's oarsman with a

cautious economy of information, for he harboured many doubts as to what would happen to him if the story of his departure from Tetzcuco were discovered. The calpixque turned to Chicoatl with a fiery glance.

"What is this Mexican kept here for? Can't you eat your own Totonac dogs?"

Chicoatl explained that he had bought him in a slave-market at Cempoal and did not know he was a Mexican. It was decided after some parley that Alonso and Long Face should leave the next morning for Mexico with the three calpixques. Chicoatl was plainly told that there could be no question of compensation.

16

That afternoon Alonso was taken out of his jail and led to a sunny veranda on the river front, where he was made to sit for his portrait. The artist worked squatting on the ground. On a mat he had laid a set of earthenware pots with colours and brushes. He painted on a cotton canvas which he stretched out on a wooden frame. He was a quick worker. The calpixques came to see the result of his work and declared themselves satisfied with it. The artist was a young, athletic man. He was a courier as well as an artist, and the calpixques sent him at top speed to Mexico—a long walk of over four hundred miles—so that he could complete his picture with verbal touches whenever necessary.

The caravan set out for Mexico the next day. It was composed of the three calpixques, the two ex-prisoners, the three servants of the calpixques and ten *tlamemes* or carriers who carried on their backs the valuable loads of cocoa, gold, silver, copper, feathers and wraps exacted as taxes in the coastal region. After a short march in the sweltering plain, they began a stiff ascent towards the heights on which stood most of the dominions of the Mexican emperor. Alonso was all eyes. He did not expect what he saw either in nature or in men. The landscape, in spite of its unfamiliar vegetation, reminded him of Spain—stony, broken, stiff, both forbidding and attractive. But he was struck with admiration at the advanced stage of civilisation and comfort which he found in the cities, some of which reminded him of the best cities of Spain. Flowers, flowers everywhere and gardens beautifully cared for. He was also deeply impressed by the respect and fear with which the calpixques were received throughout their journey. This feeling was universal and made him understand what at first had puzzled his mind: that the calpixques should venture on the road unescorted with so much treasure on the backs of their *tlamemes*.

They had no need to fear. Fear, in fact, was on the other side wherever they went.

Gradually both the weather and the landscape changed for the worse. The earth was denuded of its luxuriant vegetation and showed its bony, stony limbs, hardly covered here and there with scanty rags of shrub and brushwood; while the wind, the rain and later, sleet and snow, made the going painful. Alonso shivered. He had no clothes other than his black breeches and he walked barefoot. The calpixques, anxious to preserve their rare specimen for the imperial collection of human oddities, gave him two thick cotton wraps and some kind of shoes made of deer-skin soles to be tied to the ankles with leather-straps.

They were passing through a long, desolate, uninhabited region, and the caravan had to live on its own resources for several days. One evening, at dusk, they entered a narrow ravine which compelled them to form in Indian file, the one behind the other. The calpixques decided to take the vanguard and the rearguard. The chief calpixque passed first, then Alonso, then the servants and the tlamemes, then Long Face, followed by the two other calpixques. Suddenly, from the thick, wooded, steep slopes, two volleys of arrows fell on them, and all but Alonso and the carriers were wounded. This showed a carefully premeditated attack. Evidently the aggressors had deliberately chosen their victims, leaving out the tlamemes (too loaded to be dangerous, in any case no fighters, and useful to carry away the booty) and Alonso, for fear that he might be of a divine nature.

A host of swift but quiet, silent and efficient warriors appeared through the bushes. They found two calpixques dead and killed the third. The rest surrendered. Alonso looked on and wondered.

17

The artist-courier had lost his way. He arrived on the spot where the onslaught had taken place the following morning. He was impressed by a number of vultures which were circling and circling in wide sweeps above the ravine he knew well, and for a while hesitated before venturing downwards into its dark recesses. Presently, he stood horror-stricken at the sight of the three calpixques—their pride and glory turned to nakedness and death. He glanced at the three bodies with melancholy eyes, then proceeded to acquit himself of his duties. He unpacked his brushes and canvas and made a picture of the whole scene. There was nothing to be seen but the three dead calpixques. This had never happened before, and the artist came to the conclusion

that such a dramatic departure from custom was due to the living image of Quetzalcoatl who had been travelling with them.

Inasmuch as he himself carried in his bag a painted image of that living image, the artist grew worried. He was moreover impressed by the foreknowledge of the fate which awaited him when he would appear before Moteczuma with such gruesome tidings. When his pictures were finished, he packed up his belongings again and went on his way towards Mexico, anxious and dejected.

PART VIII

THE CRIME OF XUCHITL

I

NEZAWAL PILLI decided that upon her marriage his daughter should be accompanied to Tenochtitlán by a number of her personal servants, under Citlali, and by a special bodyguard of Tetzucans, under Ixcawatzin. The king held to his view that some deep association linked Ixcawatzin and Xuchitl together and that it was not wise for mere men to tear asunder what the stars had woven together. He gave orders that Ixcawatzin should be informed of his wish, and the young warrior-priest made all necessary preparations, proud of the distinction which was bestowed upon him.

Xuchitl did not like it. She held Ixcawatzin in high respect and esteem, but was looking forward to new friends, new faces, new ways, and in any case, felt that the young priest-soldier was too austere for her smiling outlook on life. She had however learnt to meet unpleasant events with a good face and she accepted his services gracefully.

Her wedding was a mere formality, for it was decided to adjourn the court ceremony till she should be of age to become in fact the wife of Macuilmalinatzin. In the big hall of Nezawal Pilli's palace, in the presence of her father and brothers, a priest tied together one of Xuchitl's huipils and a maxtlatl belonging to Macuilmalinatzin. Then Nezawal Pilli delivered a short and pithy address which most of the old people present condemned severely as impious merely on the ground that it had been so short. As for Xuchitl, she went through the ceremony as if it concerned someone else. The prince she was marrying was twenty-five years her senior. This fact was enough to give her a feeling of certainty that she would never actually become his wife. There was no logic whatever in it, but there was that certainty which

was worth more than any logic. Then, her dream. She remembered the pale face, the golden hair, the golden beard and she *knew* (why, she could not tell) that the strange, inexplicable vision came to fetch her out of all that. Finally, her husband himself, married to that child of twelve or thirteen years of age for political reasons, had cast but the most cursory of glances on her and given her a nice, good-hearted, paternal smile, along with lovely jewels of gold, silver, jade and feathers which Xuchitl had admired, genuinely enjoyed for a time—and put away.

She settled in her magnificent new house in Tenochtitlán, on the edge of the lake. It was spacious, built of stone and adobe with floors and inner walls of fine woodwork. A flight of stone-steps led down to the lake. There was a garden so ingeniously contrived that one was constantly meeting quiet pools of the lagoon, trapped, so to speak, within its luxuriant vegetation. Citlali took charge of her household. Xuchitl hardly ever saw her husband. She went on with her studies under the guidance of Ixcawatzin, and for the rest enjoyed herself, for which purpose a small fleet of canoes, elaborately carved and painted in bright colours, was no small asset.

2

After weeks of idle life—save for her lessons with Ixcawatzin—Xuchitl was to perform her first official duty: to be presented to Moteczuma. For the first time in her life she felt nervous. She had been told so many things about the mighty and forbidding emperor! The admonition poured on her about his strict etiquette and about the respect, almost the worship, which he exacted from even the most exalted of his subjects, had impressed her deeply. The most binding of the rules was that she was not to look him in the face. No one, under pain of death, had been allowed to do so, since his coronation.

Macuilmalinaltzin came to fetch his little wife that morning. Citlali had dressed her elaborately. Her hair was dyed purple, tressed together with black cotton thread and combed over the forehead. Her face was painted yellow, red and black, with burnt copal incense; her teeth were painted pink and her feet black. She had on a rich embroidered huipilli and wore a necklace of gold and chalchivitls.

A red and gold canoe was waiting. Macuilmalinal, in the regalia of the highest military rank, took his girl-wife by the hand and led her to the steps along which the canoe was waiting. He lifted her in his

arms, stepped into the canoe and sat proud and pleased by her side. After rowing through a labyrinth of canals they stopped before the steps of Moteczuma's private garden. Xuchitl and her husband stepped on to the polished jasper which reflected them no less faithfully where it was dry than where it was wet, and within a double file of courtiers and attendants, eager to see the new princess, they advanced towards the palace.

Each was weaving his own thoughts on the loom of his mind. Xuchitl was impressed and a little anxious, wondering whether things would go without a hitch with an emperor who was so difficult and exacting. As for Macuilmalinal, he had long ago given up all hope of pleasing his younger brother. He, the elder son of Emperor Axayacatl, had had the most reasonable expectations of being elected to the imperial throne on the death of their uncle Ahuitzotl; but for some obscure reason, Moteczuma, his younger brother, had been chosen over his head. And now, when the tyrannous and overbearing trends of Moteczuma's character, which he had hidden until his election, had come out under the sun of power, everybody realised the mistake and turned to him. This fact, for which he was not responsible, for he solicited the favour of no one, had made him unwelcome and even suspect to Moteczuma. Why his imperial brother had insisted on marrying him to Nezawal Pilli's daughter, he could not quite fathom. Time would soon show.

They were now crossing hall after hall of the magnificent palace. Floors of polished wood, walls hung with the most caressing, shifting, silky colours, obtained by skilfully weaving together several strands of rare feathers. Some of these halls were empty, others crowded with attendants, courtiers, officials and warriors all of whom broke off their murmurs and conversations and fell into an attentive silence as the ill-assorted couple passed by. A herald with a silver wand in his hand preceded them barefooted.

The herald lifted a heavy black and gold curtain and Xuchitl stood as though in ecstasy. Opposite her there was so much beauty in so much order that both her keen senses and her acute mind were seized with a pleasure akin to pain. On the wall facing her, a sun, a world, a glory, shone in all the splendour of its circular, impeccable perfection. It was so perfect and so complete that it seemed to Xuchitl as if it occupied the whole of space and as if it contained everything there was. It shone with a glorious glow which seemed to radiate from its own substance. The centre was of a deep, fiery, reddish yellow. It was round like the sun and yet had the features of the human face, eyes staring ahead, a straight nose and a curly mouth with a haunting smile not in it but over or about it, unseizable, yet clear . . . And all these features on that sun were drawn, not by shadows, but

again by light, for shadow seemed to be of another world altogether. This sun spread arrows of light upwards, downwards, to the right and to the left ; and round the central face circles and more circles and yet more circles of colours which changed softly and imperceptibly from the deep reddish yellow of the centre to the luminous and serene blue of the background which covered the whole wall. . . . And each of these circles swarmed with a multitude of living things revelling in their vitality with a vigorous zest ; flowers, that blossomed out as in a perennial dawn, serpents that crawled sedulously in an ever-eager pursuit, tigers that leapt into the air with an irresistible spring, rabbits, houses, lakes, canoes, trees and the ever-seething activity of ubiquitous men, wheeling round and round in a spiral of ever-revolving light between that unmovable central face smiling enigmatically in the centre and the empty serenity of the blue space round it.

It seemed to her as if all life everywhere and at all times were there shining before her but also living inside her ; as if that glory on the wall had kindled another glory in her so, that all she could do, think, suffer and enjoy, her past, present and future, all the canoes, gardens, little boys killed for Tlaloc, avenues of trees, birds flying away or staying on the water when shot at, lessons and picture books, marriages and deaths, all that she saw within herself of colour, movement and emotion had suddenly taken a definite shape, an order and a pre-determined movement, and was wheeling and wheeling round that central sun which smiled opposite her and round that other sun (and yet the same) which it had kindled within her, so that she could no longer disentangle the inner and the outer wheels of light, and she became herself the light and the sun and the glory.

How long did Xuchitl remain there in ecstasy ? She could not tell. But as time went by, she had a feeling that somebody was staring at her with eyes of unusual power. She looked aside in the direction of that magnetic glance, and she cast her innocent eyes on the Forbidden Face.

3

Like a cannon ball bursting through the stained glass of a cathedral, the sight of Moteczuma's face shattered Xuchitl's dream, and for a few seconds her eyes and inner space were a riot of colours and shapes in utter confusion, behind which a face no longer luminous and round, but longish, thin, bony, elegant and dark and lightless, stood without motion, withstanding the waves of colour which passed over it, dispersing them with its persistence, till they all vanished away and he

remained, stood out, dark, steady, unfathomable. Two black eyes shone deep under the protruding eyebrows.

Xuchitl forgot all her instructions, the repeated advice bestowed upon her, her duties as a princess of the royal house. She neither curtsied, nor cast her eyes down, nor said "My Lord" three times . . . She just stood silent and motionless, and stared at that face of darkness as she had stared at the face of light—with a cosmic perspective.

He was tall, well-built, both majestic and powerful in body, though by the peculiar dispensation of his spirit, his bodily attitude suggested rather the crouching watch of the tiger than the satisfied poise of the lion. His hair, black and shiny, fell in straight locks down to his shoulders and a thin, sparse, silky beard fell a few inches below his chin without concealing its profile. He was wearing neither ear nor nose jewels, though the holes were there; but a priceless chalchiwitl shone through a hole in his lower lip, which uncovered the row of his lower teeth, a dazzling white, cruel sharp-edged ivory knife. On his head a light blue tiara, made of a mosaic of the divine stone, turquoise, tied at the back by a thin thread of gold; over his naked body, a blue mantle clasped on the right shoulder with a gold brooch in the shape of a shrimp; his feet were shod with gold-soled *cotaras* of green-dyed tigerskin and constellated with chalchiwitls.

He had not troubled to answer his brother's greetings and stood staring at his girlish sister-in-law. Xuchitl was utterly unaware of the impression she was making. Austere and self-disciplined during the years which had preceded his election, Moteczuma had become more and more addicted to sexual pleasures when he found his orders and caprices unchecked by any authority but that of his own self-control. He was known to seek the advice and the help of his magicians in order to increase his masculine powers and was highly susceptible to feminine charm. Xuchitl was just beginning to bud as a woman. Moteczuma, a connoisseur, saw that at the first glance; the bud was there already in its pristine charm and when the eyes of the emperor and those of the tender rose met for the first time, both were deeply troubled at the strange and unexpected quality of the glance.

It was not till then that, through her emotion, deeper than she could fathom at the moment, Xuchitl remembered that she had committed a crime punishable by death. She looked the emperor in the face, not merely with one of those furtive glances which no one could spy, but with a long, steady stare such as no one had ever thought possible. Yet, her feminine instinct reassured her, for she felt that the emperor would not condemn her for having given him the opportunity to exchange that glance; though deep down in her, she perceived that there was an unfathomable abyss of danger—death perhaps—in that ambiguous glance itself.

Then the emperor spoke. He was delighted, friendly, desirous to please. He took Xuchitl by the hand—a hot hand, she thought—clammy and damp—and led her to the grounds to see the ponds made of jasper, marble and granite, in which he kept thousands of the rarest aquatic birds. He did his best to amuse and entertain her, but while the birds fluttered under her eyes and filled air, water and green lawns with their carefree disorder, Xuchitl saw nothing but that glance of the two dark eyes which had shattered her perfect golden dream—for ever?

4

One of Xuchitl's first visits was devoted to Papantzin, Moteczuma's sister, who since the death of her husband, lived a retired life in Tlatelulco, the part of the town which her husband had governed all his life. She had remained in the quiet possession of his truly royal houses and grounds. Xuchitl found her to her liking. She was a woman of about forty, who seemed to have acquired an unshakable poise and serenity and whom nothing could ruffle or perturb. She received her girlish sister-in-law most affectionately and was at once on terms of the utmost friendliness with her yet without effusion.

Xuchitl took to her from the first day and would look at her for long, when she could without being noticed. She found a deep pleasure in these long draughts she took of Papan's face, a pleasure which she was not at first able to understand—not till it dawned upon her that Papan and Womb-of-Jade were sisters—and then the likeness between the two became clear to her, and she realised that her pleasure in looking at Papantzin was due to the memories of the haunting face of the ghost.

But how different, though! Papantzin seemed to be impervious to passion. Her voice was feminine, tender and motherly, and her movements quiet and dignified. She loved her flowers and used to spend days in her garden enjoying the colour and aroma of her marvellous roses.

One day, when she had been showing her roses to Xuchitl in her lovely garden, they came upon a door which stood unexpectedly astride a sandy path, closing a cavity under what looked like a mound. "What is this?" asked Xuchitl. And Papantzin, quietly without a shadow of feeling answered: "It is a resting place for me for when I am dead."

5

That night, as Xuchitl was sleeping peacefully, she heard a clamour rising from the city. She thought at first it was part of her dream. It woke her up. The clamour continued. It was as if the whole of Mexico were crying to heaven. The clamour was rising in the night around her. She went out to a terrace and saw Citlali squatting devoutly with her face upwards. There was a curious light about, like moonlight, but stronger and yellower. She looked up. The sky was lit up by an immense triangle of light, with its apex in the zenith and its base on the east.

"Why are they all crying, Citlali?"

"Something is going to happen!" answered Citlali, and she shook her head.

They remained there watching the prodigy for a long time. But Xuchitl grew sleepy and quietly slipped into her bed again, leaving Citlali on the terrace, praying and listening now and then to a new wave of fear and piety which arose from the town.

Meanwhile in the imperial palace all was in turmoil. Moteczuma could not be found. No one dared either to leave him in ignorance of the portent or to find out where he was; for every one in the palace surmised that he had gone to spend the night with one or other of his concubines, and in these matters he was of a secretiveness which brooked no interference. Fortunately, however, for his chief steward Petalcalcatl, the wails of the whole population had reached him in his amorous seclusion and he suddenly appeared in the central hall of his palace. He was pale and downcast, but no one was able to notice it, for no one dared look him in the face.

He turned towards the gallery which led to his private apartments and called Petalcalcatl who followed his steps like a soft-footed dog. At the end of the gallery there was an open terrace which looked out on to the lake. Moteczuma went out on it and stood awe-struck, with a kind of religious admiration. From his point of vantage the lake reflected all the light in the sky and its water seemed to have turned into liquid gold. One-third of the sky was also luminous. But what struck him most was the apex of the light—a sharp point which seemed to be stuck in the zenith like a spear of some hard, shining metal.

His mind, naturally bent on magic, and used to the idea of self-sacrifice with maguëy-thorns or bone-bodkins, saw in that sharp point a presage of sacrifice and of some imminent danger for his divinity. In short, Moteczuma felt both that he ought to discipline himself at once with a tiger-bone bodkin and that his gods were to be the object of a powerful attack coming from the east.

He turned to his chief steward, bade him bring him his bone needle and then, in the still night, under the strange light of the sky which had made the stars recede before its splendour, he drew blood from his arms, legs and tongue and sprinkled it towards the east, muttering magic formulas and secret incantations.

6

The next day Papantzin died suddenly. She had not been ill one single minute. She was walking leisurely in her beautiful garden, when she felt weak, tried to lean on a tree, lost her balance and fell. She was found there by her servants later in the morning.

Moteczuma received the news with complete indifference. He was not fond of his family, with the one exception of the Wanton-Queen, whom he had loved and whose mysterious death he had never forgiven Nezawal Pilli. Papantzin was indifferent to him. "Are you sure she is dead?" he asked his sister's steward, who had brought him the news. "Remember that you told me she was dead twice already and she had only had a fit." But the steward, who was not likely to forget, for he had twice been in danger of death owing to his mistake, assured the emperor that this time the healer-omen-reader was absolutely sure that Papantzin was dead. Moteczuma gave orders to have the funeral ceremonies performed in the usual fashion. But Papantzin had left instructions that she was not to be cremated; she was to be left sitting on a chair of matting inside the cave she had prepared in the garden for the purpose. Moteczuma, after some hesitation, agreed to this, much to the surprise of the magicians and priests, who did not realise how deeply the emperor had been shaken by the spear of light.

Xuchitl was saddened by the news. She felt that she had lost Womb-of-Jade for the second time. She remembered how Papantzin had shown her the door of her resting place and decided that on the fourth day she would take her some flowers. So, on the fourth day, she chose the most beautiful flowers in her garden, mostly roses which were Papantzin's favourite ones, and went to Tlatelolco. She had taken Ixcawatzin with her as an escort, but she left him at the entrance of the garden where she had spent so many hours with her dead friend. She needed no guide. In the few weeks she had frequented Papantzin, she had learned to come and go all over the grounds. She went straight to the mound. As she turned the curve of the path, she saw a woman sitting on the garden-seat outside. "How odd!" thought Xuchitl, "she sits just as Papantzin used to do, with her hands folded

over her right knee!" She walked on. The woman heard the steps and turned round. Xuchitl's astonished eyes beheld Papantzin. And the door of the mound was open.

Xuchitl remained motionless with the roses in her hand, staring at the vision. Papantzin smiled her affectionate, pale smile and said, "Dear precious feather! How nice of you to bring me flowers. But you see, I am back."

Xuchitl did not dare come near her. "Do come, my little jade. I am alive. You see? And I want to talk to you. I have already had this experience twice before, but only for a few hours . . . and not so deep."

Xuchitl walked on and no longer unable to speak, but still unable to find what to say, gave her the roses. Papantzin took her hands in hers and Xuchitl noticed that she was warm and that her complexion was lively, in fact livelier than . . . before. "I am so glad you are here!" she said at last. Papantzin gave her a friendly glance. "I want to speak to my brother about what I have seen . . ." She seemed to think it over, to ponder over what she ought to do. "No. I think it would be better if we asked your father to come over. It is worth it. He is the only man who can speak to Moteczuma about it and yet keep his life."

7

The artist-courier left the ravine with a heavy heart. During the rest of the journey he thought over the situation with the close attention of a man whose skin is at stake. Suddenly, after he had already gone over the path between the two volcanoes and he could see the great lagoon, he had an idea which relieved his anxiety: he was a native of Tetzcuco; he would go first to Nezawal Pilli with his story. He knew the king of Tetzcuco was a strange man who did not sentence couriers to death because they brought bad news; and he would open his heart to his king and confess his fear. The king would find something.

With a lighter step he boldly took the road towards Tetzcuco and had himself introduced into the presence of the king. He related the scene in Chicoatl's cage, then the scene in the gorge, finally his own fears. "Show me the pictures," said Nezawal Pilli. He unfolded that of the massacre of the calpixques first, but the king laid it aside without a word. He had seen enough pictures of massacres in his life. Then the painter showed him the portrait of the white man with the golden hair. Nezawal Pilli was much impressed and put a number of questions to the courier on the size, limbs and movements of the new man.

The colour of his eyes struck him deeply. "Is it like the sky or like water?" he asked. "Something between the two, and it varies with what he is looking at."

Nezawal Pilli remained in silence for a long while. He had always expected that some kind of bearded men would some day arrive from the east, for he thought that Quetzalcoatl had been one such man who had strayed into Mexico in some remote past. He was intrigued, somewhat concerned, but not surprised. "Very well," he said to the courier, "go to Yeicatl and ask him to house you in the main quarters till further orders. I will convey your message to the emperor."

8

That very morning Ixcawatzin came to see King Nezawal Pilli with a message from Xuchitl to the effect that Papantzin had been four days in the Region without doors or windows and had returned with tidings of so much interest that she begged him to come and listen to them. Ixcawatzin explained that he had been instructed to add that Papantzin thought Nezawal Pilli should be the first to be informed of them and that he was the only one qualified to convey them to Moteczuma.

Nezawal Pilli left at once for Tenochtitlán, taking the white man's portrait with him. He sent a message to the emperor asking him for an audience in the afternoon and went first straight to Papantzin's house. Xuchitl was there also.

Papantzin received Nezawal Pilli with deep satisfaction. "You are the only person to whom I can explain my extraordinary experience." Xuchitl glanced at her imploringly. "Yes, my precious little feather. You can stay and listen. What I could not tell you when you were alone, without your father's assistance, may be told you now, when he will be here to support you." She turned to the king. "You know I have been four days on my way to Mictlantecutli and have come back. I was in a wide plain, so wide indeed that I could see no end to it anywhere. In the middle of the plain, I saw a road which splayed out into several paths, and on one side a powerful river flowed with much noise. As I was on the point of throwing myself into the river to pass over to the other side I saw a resplendent youth in mid-air. He said to me, 'Stay. Your time has not come yet. God loves you though you do not know Him yet.' On his forehead, he had a sign like this," and Papantzin made a cross with her two forefingers. "I then followed him along the riverside and heard heart-rending wails; then the river widened into a kind of haven and I saw huge canoes,

so huge that our biggest ones would look like toys beside them, and they were full of men whose skin was like paper and whose beards were like copper or gold and many had eyes the colour of the sky."

Nezawal Pilli listened to this description with the closest attention and Xuchitl was awed and fascinated. Papantzin went on: "They landed. They brought with them some new animals looking very much like deer, but bigger, and they went about sitting on the backs of those animals, which made them very swift. I saw some of them overrun the whole plain in less time than it would take your best courier to run through my hall. Then I opened my eyes and found I was here, in my garden."

The king had not watched his daughter. He had kept his eyes on Papantzin. But as she heard the description of the men that overran the plain, Xuchitl remembered her dream and was anxious to impart it to her father. She was married now and could therefore speak without asking for leave. But she felt her father too deep in thought to be disturbed. He held a copper tube in his hand. He drew a piece of cotton from it, unrolled it and asked Papantzin: "Were they like this?" "Oh! Exactly!" cried out Xuchitl. Both her father and Papantzin were astonished. "How do you know?" asked Nezawal Pilli. And Xuchitl told them her dream.

9

That afternoon Nezawal Pilli was received by Moteczuma. The king of Tetzcuco had aged in body and mind since the death of the Wanton-Queen. It seemed as if when that chain of flesh which bound him to life had snapped, his spirit had found itself more free to roam in the spaces of visible and invisible nature, and he had turned to astrology, to philosophy and to meditation on man and fate, with an added zest and a much richer experience. His handsome features had taken on a sadder look, a deep, inconsolable sadness born of the experience of his inner imperfection. He had heard Papantzin's revelations with the profound conviction that they fitted in with his own forebodings, grounded as they were on reasonable deductions from known facts. Xuchitl came to confirm them quite unexpectedly with the tale of her dream. Finally the picture brought to him by the courier added external truth to all these converging presentments. Nezawal Pilli went therefore to see the emperor with the certainty that the men of Quetzalcoatl were coming back and that, therefore, the empire of Anahuac was nearing its end.

Moteczuma felt more respect and fear than gratitude or love towards him. Though he owed his election to Nezawal Pilli, the emperor, whose mind was strictly realistic and worked only under the stress of facts (the facts of visible power and the fancies of invisible power which his faith turned into facts) felt no gratitude to him ; but he respected Nezawal Pilli because he thought the king had strong magic powers and was capable of turning into a tiger, an eagle or a lion at a moment's notice ; moreover, he knew that Nezawal Pilli had an accurate and detailed knowledge of the movements of the stars—in Moteczuma's eyes, of course, a most dangerous and formidable power to possess.

The emperor received Nezawal Pilli with the utmost deference. The king had a thorny problem to solve before he came to business : he had to save the life of the courier who, breaking a most rigid law, had strayed away from his prescribed path in order to report his epoch-making message to the king of Tetzcuco instead of to the emperor of Mexico. But Nezawal Pilli knew Moteczuma well and how best to handle him.

"Sir," he began, "I have been happy to save you from a disaster through mere hazard. I was watching the general lay-out of the constellations when I discerned that a dangerous combination was being formed in the skies against you. A courier who was travelling hither from the coast brought tidings which—portentous in themselves—would, according to my stars, have been fatal to you, had they been delivered directly into your hands. This discovery worried me greatly, till I struck on a way out. I managed to fill the courier's heart with fear for his life if he came here with the news. I made him come to me instead, and I was able to see in the skies how the conflagration against your life disintegrated as the man advanced towards my capital."

Moteczuma had followed the narrative with a passionate attention, his head slightly bent forward, as he sat on his golden ycpalli. "Father," he answered, "I am grateful to you. But the law is the law and the courier must be skinned alive."

Nezawal Pilli was too much of a master of his own features to betray the grim mirth which the emperor's remark raised in his soul. "Of course !" he answered, "... on one condition : that his death does not altogether destroy the effect of my ruse. As I was not interested in the man's life," he added shrewdly, "I have not gone into that. I will study the point this very night."

Moteczuma was content to leave the matter in the king's hands, the more so as he felt most uneasy and needed his advice on other affairs. "I wonder," he remarked, trying in vain to look unconcerned, "whether the disaster you have averted was that which these

night-meteors portend. If that were so," he added, somewhat lamentably, "we should have paid off that score already, thanks to you."

But Nezawal Pilli did not let him rest on that wishful thought. "No, sir. You seem to have forgotten that the courier had a message for you. I must deliver it. But before doing so, I must inform you of a dream and of a resurrection." Nezawal Pilli told the emperor his daughter's dream. Moteczuma was much alarmed. "And you say he was like Quetzalcoatl?" he asked. "Yes, save that his beard was golden and not black."

"Perhaps he is a higher lord still!" observed Moteczuma, and he asked, "How about that resurrection?"

Nezawal Pilli then told Moteczuma the story of Papantzin's voyage to the underworld. "How is it she did not come to me first?" he asked peevishly. "Out of respect for your peace of mind. The tale was of such a grave import that she felt I should come and prepare you for it." "And they were many men? . . . And they overran the country? . . ." The unfortunate emperor put these questions to himself, in a hopeless sort of voice, expecting no answer. Nezawal Pilli looked at him with pity, yet with an aloofness born of his feeling that nothing mattered any more.

"And do you think it will happen soon?" asked Moteczuma, this time pointedly. Nezawal Pilli unfolded his cotton picture. "Here is one already on our shores." He gave the emperor a brief account of the story he had from the courier and explained how it was impossible to know where the stranger had gone. "A god! Undoubtedly a god!" muttered Moteczuma in amazement and dejection, drinking in the picture with avid eyes. "He may be anywhere. He may arrive any day. He killed my calpixques. Those brutish Otomies are nothing but his tools. They would never have dared . . . What will become of us?"

Nezawal Pilli felt compassion for the poor man. "No, sir. I have read the stars carefully. Nothing can happen for a few years." And he left Moteczuma somewhat reconciled to a fate which gave him some respite.

IO

The emperor summoned his chief magicians and asked them: "What have you seen in the skies?" They glanced at each other, wondering what they should answer. Obviously, the emperor could not mean the meteor, for everybody had seen it without being a magician. "Sir," answered the eldest of the wiseacres, "we have seen

nothing but the old stars and the new moon." Moteczuma's black eyes flashed and, with a violent gesture of his left arm, he struck a golden gong with a short, golden stick he carried in his hand. Petalcalcatl stood before him as if by magic. "Take all these rascals to the wooden cage and have them skinned alive." Not an eyelid moved in the chief steward's face. He turned round and moved towards the door, knowing that the melancholy procession of impotent magicians would follow him meekly.

This vicarious sacrifice eased Moteczuma's heart from much of his anxiety. Time went by and the men of Quetzalcoatl did not materialise. The meteor itself grew fainter and fainter and at last vanished, never to return. The river of days and nights gradually washed away, if not his worry, at least the hurtful, sharp corners of it, making it soft and bearable as a mere weight, and he sought distraction in fêtes and sports and in the company of his women.

After a few months of discreet patience, the emperor, who had never forgotten his girlish sister-in-law, gave orders that Xuchitl should take her turn in serving him at table. As in Europe, the royal service, at first a menial occupation, had gradually risen in dignity, and Moteczuma, who had himself treated as an almost divine person, had chosen for his service the highest of the land. Xuchitl's appointment did not surprise any one, even though it increased the misgivings which her husband, Citlali and Ixcawatzin were beginning to feel about Moteczuma's intentions. Xuchitl herself took the news as a pure matter of Court routine.

The emperor always took his meals alone. There was a brazier of a special smokeless bark in the hall, which filled the air with a pleasant, aromatic odour, and Moteczuma was protected from the direct glow of its fire by a wooden screen elaborately sculpted and decorated with golden ornaments. An army of servants laid on the floor, along a whole side of the hall, several dozens of different dishes, mostly meat, poultry and fish, each on top of a small earthenware brazier. The emperor passed along this exhibition and, with his golden wand, touched his choice for the day, then went to sit on his low ycpalli, before which a red and gold leather cushion, acting as a table, was already laid with a soft, embroidered white tablecloth, red Cholula faience plates and a few obsidian knives with golden handles. When he sat down the doors which separated his dining enclosure from the rest of the hall were shut, so that the crowd of hangers-on should not see him. The four maids of honour remained inside and at times also one or two dwarfs or hunchbacks with whose jests he liked to pass the time.

One of the maids offered him water for his hands in a golden jar, while another one held a golden basin under it; a third maid—that

day, it happened to be Xuchitl, it was her first day in his service—offered him a snow-white towel. Moteczuma took it and took Xuchitl's hand as well, holding it in his for a while. The other three maids looked on, surprised, and so did a dwarfish hunchback who had been summoned that day by the emperor. But Moteczuma, unaware of the impression he was creating, took some pancakes made of maize flour and eggs from a dish offered by the fourth maid. The first maid brought a dish of partridges with tomatoes and chilis. Moteczuma ate with his fingers, in silence. The four maids waited, standing in a row, some distance away. Moteczuma beckoned Xuchitl to come near him. He took a morsel of partridge from his plate and offered it to her. Xuchitl blushed, took it and ate it. Though the emperor used to offer of his food—in special separate plates—to some rare privileged personages who were at times allowed to stand by while he ate, such a thing as this offer of a morsel from his own plate had never been seen or heard of. The maids were astonished and Xuchitl confused. The dwarf grinned and with the worst possible intention sneered: "Sir, that flesh is too tender yet." The emperor shot such a savage, fiery glance at his dwarf that the terrorised creature crawled away towards a corner behind his master, in the hope of being forgotten.

The imperial meal went on in silence. When the fruit had been served, the first maid brought Moteczuma a cup of gold full of cold cocoa. The emperor's cocoa was often mixed with drugs to stimulate his carnal powers. He took the cup and said dryly to the maid: "My cocoa must henceforth be served by Xuchitl." He drank it off, then held out his hand for the tobacco cane which was offered by the second maid. He sat back, smoking with a deep sensuous delight. "Xuchitl, your turn to dance!" The emperor struck his gong three times. Petalcalcatl appeared. "A drummer," ordered Moteczuma. The steward turned half-circle and signalled to the musician, who had been waiting. He was a middle-aged man, with no other covering than his loincloth, and he carried a wooden drum or *teponaztli* in his hand and a stick to play it with. He sat on the floor and began to strike the wood with a strong, redoubled rhythm. Xuchitl was in deep confusion. She had never danced before strangers, let alone before the emperor himself. But Moteczuma's word was an order. She moved slowly on to the centre of the free space and improvised as well as she could. Moteczuma smoked in silence, with his eyes half-closed, and through the slit of his eyelids cast sensuous glances at the young budding rose which moved lightly and gracefully before him.

II

Moteczuma's infatuation for Xuchitl grew apace with her own feminine charm as the months and the years gradually turned her into a woman. Xuchitl was constantly summoned to his side under one pretext or another. To-day a party on the lake, to-morrow a ceremony at Court, Xuchitl was sure to be there, always close to the emperor. He did not trouble to hide his passion, or at least did not succeed in doing so. Xuchitl's husband did not at first pay much attention to what was going on at Court. He was an active man who took to heart his duties as instructor of the warriors, particularly in the difficult art of catching prisoners alive to feed the altars of the gods; and he had never given much importance to his marriage with Xuchitl, which he considered as purely political. While the whole town and Court spoke of little else, he went about his business, unconcerned. Not so Citlali, who was a puritan and, shocked by the cynical disregard for matrimony which the emperor exhibited, was sure that the gods would avenge it, while on more personal grounds, she feared the consequences which the emperor's infatuation might bring about in Xuchitl's life. As for Ixcawatzin, his feelings were deeper and more burning. He had never dared to look closely into the actual ties which linked him with Xuchitl; but felt them constantly pulling at his heart. The emperor's indiscreet attentions made him miserable. He had not failed to observe how Xuchitl was growing up and blossoming out into a comely young woman, which made it more difficult than ever to remain detached, loyal only to his service as the head of the princess' bodyguard. He hated Moteczuma and believed him capable of anything to reach his ends. Ixcawatzin would spend hours of prayer by the image of Quetzalcoatl, trying to find out whether anything could be done to avoid the catastrophe which he felt coming.

One day he heard at Court that Moteczuma was thinking of declaring war on the city of Atlixco. He was rather relieved. He would ask to go to that war so that fighting should take his mind away from Xuchitl's charms and Moteczuma's snares. But in the group of courtiers who were discussing the news, someone pointed out that Moteczuma was thinking of granting the golden drum to his brother Macuilmalinal. The golden drum was the insignia of the commander in chief. Nothing more was said. The eyes of some of the men present glistened for a tenth of a second but soon recovered the usual dullness of all courtier's eyes. Ixcawatzin saw it all. He was no fool and he had read some history. He seized upon the first pretext he could find and went straight to Tetzcuco to report the matter to the king.

"Sir," he said to Nezawal Pilli, "all I have seen and heard leads me to think that Moteczuma has a passion for Xuchitl and that he means to get rid of his brother as your royal father got rid of Cuacuahzin to marry Azcalxuchitl." And the loyal guardian told the king all he had seen and observed.

Nezawal Pilli remained silent for a long time, pulling at his cigar now and then, glancing now and then at Ixcawatzin. The young man's training was so excellent that he remained on his feet, straight, motionless and perfectly poised in body and mind, while the king's own mind was busy.

"Did you say that Moteczuma is going to celebrate Xuchitl's coming of age?" he asked at last.

"Yes, sir."

"That should be in twenty days from now. Do you reckon that he is likely to go to war before that?"

"No, sir. He will not be ready for at least three months."

"Very well. I will provide some entertainment for that fête."

There was a faint suggestion of a smile in the king's face and Ixcawatzin returned to Mexico with the feeling that the king-magician had found a way out and would avert disaster.

12

The fête in honour of Xuchitl's coming of age took place in the royal palace, during a sunny afternoon, partly in a big hall, partly, on a wide terrace which ran alongside it between the palace and the lagoon. The guests were numerous and included all the leading families of the State as well as those of the wealthy merchants. The men came clad in rich cotton wraps interwoven with precious feathers of the most vivid and caressing colours. The warriors wore their hair combed into a tuft high on the top of the head, from which there hung down their backs heavy, bulky ornaments of long feathers, flowing cataracts of colour. Those who lived a more sedentary life wore the *quetzalalpitoal*, an ornament composed of two tassels made of feathers and gold, hanging over the sides of the face from the top of the head. Most of them wore earrings of gold or precious stones. Round their wrists some wore golden bracelets, others a stone of jade held by a black strap of deer-leather. Many wore some heavy ornament hanging from a hole in the lower lip, which made them show their lower teeth. This ornament might be a *chalchiwitl* or a piece of crystal inside which had been inserted a few tiny green or blue feathers, which transfigured the crystal into an iridescent artificial precious stone; or a half moon

of gold. Many had precious stones, mostly turquoises, inserted in holes on each of the nostrils. The warriors went about with a kind of artificial moustache of bright blue or green feathers, hanging from a hole in the nose partition. On their chests, necklaces of gold, or chalchiwitls, of golden shrimps, of pearls. The more elegant, or the richer ones wore bracelets made of turquoises from which hung long, graceful, tail feathers of high value, from some rare bird. Their legs were covered with golden greaves and in their hands most of them carried a small golden flag topped with a tuft of precious feathers. These elegant exquisites wore on their heads a kind of hat of precious feathers made up in the form of a bird, with its beak to the fore and its long tail hanging over their necks and shoulders.

Some of the men carried long fans made of priceless feathers, green, blue, red, orange, purple and dazzling white; others carried nosegays of variegated flowers; others an aromatic tube of tobacco which they smoked, blowing out blue puffs of smoke into the scent-laden air of the hall. Every one of them was followed by a young page, naked but for a richly embroidered loin-cloth, who carried a small mirror of polished stone for his master to verify now and then the state of his several and complicated ornaments.

All these magnificent men, glittering with gold, dazzling with a multiplicity of colours, came and went with proud bearing and dignified gestures amongst a crowd of simply clad women, walking softly with bare feet, their hair, dyed purple, hanging straight down their back down to their waist. They were all painted, yellow, red or black or a combination of the three colours, and some of them had bluish designs tattooed on the arms, chest and breasts; their teeth were dyed pink and some wore necklaces and bracelets, modest and simple, a poor imitation of the gorgeous ornaments of their husbands, sons and brothers.

At one end of the hall stood a battery of wooden drums; the *wewetl*, a tall, hollow trunk, gaudily painted, closed over with a deer-skin, which was played with the fingers, an instrument capable of a variety of notes and sounds; and the *teponaztli*, made entirely of wood, including the striking surface, which was beaten with sticks and provided the rhythmical, undertone accompaniment to the treble of the *wewetl*. The musicians waited, fingers and sticks ready, for the dance to begin as the accompaniment of some historical poem. In the four corners of the hall braziers burnt odorous barks and woods to soften the cool air which blew in from the lagoon.

The hall was full and the several streams of conversation were already flowing together into one humming river, when Moteczuma appeared, and all were silent for a while. He showed himself but very rarely among his subjects and every one realised how exceptional was

the honour granted to Xuchitl. The emperor was wearing a blue mantle—for blue was the imperial colour—and a blue diadem. He glanced round with a sovereign eye. He was looking for Xuchitl. She came forward hand in hand with her husband and formally stopped three times before approaching him, saying successively at every curtsy: "Lord"; "My Lord"; "Great Lord." She was wearing an embroidered huipil of purple cotton, as soft as silk, and Moteczuma noticed that it showed her budding breasts. She was not painted and her hair was not dyed—both facts noted unfavourably by all the women present, who saw in them signs of a forward disposition on the part of Xuchitl. Moteczuma smiled and took Xuchitl's left hand in his. Then Xuchitl, with the emperor holding her left hand and her husband her right, walked to the end of the room opposite the drums, where the three sat on ycpallis. The rest stood on their feet. The emperor signalled with his golden wand and dancing began.

A leader came out from behind the drum battery dancing in perfect rhythm, with a motion of arms and legs which revealed excellent training. Behind them, a number of professional dancers followed, and gradually the younger men among the guests followed the professionals, forming a ring of dancers round the room; another similar ring had been formed at the other end of the room, advancing in the opposite direction and inside the circle of the first. When the two rings were closed, the singers began to chant a poem in tune with the drummers; there was in their song as in the dancing music much more rhythm than melody; it was almost a conversational recitative, strongly stressed on the drum beats. The poem celebrated the coming of age of Xuchitl and the happiness which a woman in blossom brings to a man's life. It was a long poem, in the patient vein of the Aztecs, and the dance went on in perfect order, every arm, every leg moving so true to the whole that they rose and fell as one making a perfectly even surface. There was training in it, marvellous training; but also fear of the Emperor, who was known to have punished with death trifling imperfections in this difficult art. He seemed pleased with the fête and as the poem (which he knew by heart) was coming to an end, he beckoned with his golden wand and Petalcalcatl, his faithful Uei-Calpixque, led in a procession of nosegay-bearers who distributed flowers to the chief dancers.

There was a brief interlude, and then on a motion of Moteczuma's wand, the drummers struck the beginning of a new dance. Moteczuma knew nothing about it, save that king Nezawal Pilli had prepared it all in Tetzcuco, and had sent his own singers and dancers to lead it. In the usual fashion, the guests would join in the dance and, after a while, would also be able to repeat the refrain of the song. The drums had taken a slower rhythm and were spreading a kind of elegiac,

sombre atmosphere over the brilliant, colourful room, not quite in keeping with the occasion. The dance-leaders appeared from behind the drums, walking slowly, with gestures of longing and regret. The two circles were closed and the chorus leaders began in their softly modulated Tetzucan accent, so melodious to the harder Mexican ear :

This is the song of regret of the King Nezawal Coyotl . . .

This is the song of regret which the King Nezawal Coyotl

Sighs from his sorrowful heart and gives forth from his tardy mind,

For love made him once go astray from the narrow path of the law

And he paid for his rash behaviour with blood from the fruit of his love . . .

This is the song of regret of the King Nezawal Coyotl . . .

All those present knew the story of King Nezawal Coyotl and his young wife Azcalxuchitl, and many were aware of Moteczuma's intentions to get rid of Xuchitl's husband, his own brother, as Nezawal Coyotl had got rid of Azcalxuchitl's husband. It was severely forbidden to look at Moteczuma in the face, but who could control such a crowd ? Furtive glances cast at him were catching glimpses of his inner struggle. He was not used to brook any interference with his slightest wishes. But the singers were singing a poem probably composed by Nezawal Pilli for the occasion. What was he to do ?

The drummers went on beating a melancholy rhythm, while the two wings of dancers, unaware of the tension which was rising in the hall, went on interpreting the poem with the utmost perfection :

Oh how short-lived is our lust ! Oh how long-lived is our grief !

Struck in the heart by the arrows shot from the eyes of a girl,

I laid a trap underground to destroy a proud ocelotl.

I did not struggle in battle nor under the light of the sun.

I laid a trap in the darkness, for the proud ocelotl to fall.

How could my satisfied lust drive the regret from my heart ?

A shrill vibration of Moteczuma's gong put a sudden stop to the dance and to the poem. All movement ceased. Not a whisper was to be heard. All eyes were cast down, for no one dared incur the deadly anger of the emperor. His voice was heard with a thrill of terror. " Petalcalcatl, I cannot tolerate bad singing and worse dancing. The chief singer and the chief dancer will be skinned alive. The other professionals will be sacrificed to Witchilopochtli. Bring the drinks."

Maids circulated amongst the crowds of guests with jars of cold cocoa. Most of the guests were relieved of their anxiety, particularly

those who had shared in the dance and who, but for the grace of Witchilopochtli, might also have been filing out of the room dejected and downcast, towards their sacrifice, with the professional dancers and singers. Xuchitl had gone through the ordeal with the utmost self-control, the centre of all attention, sitting in perfect outward peace while a storm was raging in her soul, aware of every one of the natural forces which were struggling under her eyes. Her husband appeared to be either below or above the events, cold and impressive in his warlike attire, and the curve of his lower lip, showing a row of terrifying teeth, might be due to contempt or merely to the weight of the half moon of gold which hung from it. Ixcawatzin was not present.

The heart had gone out of the fête and gradually the guests stole away, most of them in canoes which came to the edge of the terrace to fetch them. Not long after Moteczuma's outburst the hall was empty and nothing remained in it of the gaudy, colourful crowd but a fine dust of variegated plush from the wear and tear of the rich feathers, fluttering idly along the polished floors at the mercy of the soft wind.

13

When the festivity was over, Petalcalcatl sought leave to see the emperor. "Sir, I find that all the singers and dancers sentenced are King Nezawal Pilli's men." Moteczuma frowned viciously. He realised that Nezawal Pilli had manoeuvred him into an untenable position. If, now, he sent his brother to a battle from which he did not come back, everybody would point him out as a second Nezawal Coyotl. He was furious with Nezawal Pilli and his first impulse was to answer his chief steward: "So much the better!" But he remembered Nezawal Pilli's magic powers and wondered. As a matter of fact, he thought, it was evident that Nezawal Pilli had guessed his secret intentions by magic means. He had to be careful. "Do you know their names?" he asked, without looking at the steward. "Yes, sir."

"Very well. Let them go and punish a set of my subjects with the same names." This, for Moteczuma, was almost as good.

14

A few months went by. Moteczuma recovered his usual self. The emotion caused by Nezawal Pilli's stratagem had died down and the

emperor was not in a state to stop himself from carrying out his secret plan. He loved Xuchitl—in his way—and he hated his popular brother. So, it had to be. War was declared against Atlixco and Macuilmalinal received the golden drum. The popular prince knew what awaited him. On the appointed day he dressed in the attire of the chief warriors, those who had caught at least six prisoners alive and who had sworn not to recede when fighting single-handed before twenty enemies. He was a gorgeous sight, with his hair combed high and his feather head-dress hanging low on his back, with his yellow mantle embroidered with two white suns and open on the right side. In his ears he wore long, red cylindrical ornaments, and from his lower lip a long, golden bar which fell straight down to his chest. A page carried his standard of green feathers and his wooden spear, edged with obsidian blades. Slung over his shoulder, the small golden drum shone on his back.

Macuilmalinal came to say farewell to Xuchitl. He had asked Ixcawatzin to be present. Xuchitl had seldom seen her husband in the three years they had been formally married. She was struck by his manly beauty, clear, courageous eyes and affable demeanour. "Xuchitl, farewell. I shall not see you again. You are the instrument the gods have chosen to take me away. I would have liked to live with you. But I shall enjoy my death like a soldier. I leave you in the hands of Ixcawatzin." Xuchitl wept. Ixcawatzin kept silent. He had longed to go to the war, yet how could he, knowing all that was happening? The gods were taking away Xuchitl's main support in Mexico. The other one, Nezawal Pilli in Tetzcuco, was ageing and, it seemed to Ixcawatzin, beginning to dispose his mind to leave the earth also. Ixcawatzin remained as her only protector. He kept silent and the sudden shrill note of a conch trumpet put an end to the scene.

Macuilmalinal went to his headquarters and changed from parade to campaign kit. He donned his *ichcahuipilli*, a coat of cotton about half an inch thick, to guard against arrows, over which he wore a leather coat tied at the back, adorned with feathers and strengthened with plates of gold and silver. His shield was made of a framework of hard reeds and a sheet of leather also covered with plates of gold and silver and adorned with golden shrimps, for he was a knight of an Order which gave him such a privilege. His legs were covered with greaves of gold. A helmet of strong leather, shaped to imitate a tiger's head, completed his campaign dress.

He left the town at the head of eight thousand soldiers, followed by a long file of tlamenes carrying his supplies, and accompanied by a noisy band of youngsters who marched alongside the warriors in step with the warlike drums till the army was out of town.

There were eight days of suspense. Then, one morning, a courier arrived from camp. He wore his hair in disorder, hanging over his face, and walked dejectedly. He neither looked nor spoke to any one. Those who had men at the front withdrew indoors to hide their grief and shame. It meant defeat. The courier arrived in the palace and was shown into the presence of Moteczuma. The emperor had called his council together to hear the news which he had expected, for all was happening according to his plan. The Mexican battalions had fled at the first onslaught of the enemy and their chief Macuilmalinal had perished, killed on the battlefield, not caught alive by his adversaries. "And then?" asked Moteczuma. "I know no more." That was the correct answer, the one which Moteczuma awaited. Turning to his council, he said: "Men we are. As men we must behave. Let us hope for better news."

It came in the afternoon. A second courier arrived, running gaily, his hair neatly combed in tresses, a white cloth round his body, a buckler on his left arm and a big stick on the right hand, which he brandished with the utmost zest. The Mexicans had counter-attacked and avenged their leader's death. The enemy had surrendered and declared himself ready to pay a tribute in gold, cotton and maize. There were over one thousand prisoners to be sacrificed to Witchilopochtli.

"Our hopes in our lord Witchilopochtli were justified," Moteczuma exclaimed piously. And he added: "Let us go to the temple and thank him. Petalcatli, tell my page to bring my box of thorns."

15

When, after his devotions, Moteczuma turned his mind to Xuchitl again, he was told that the girl-widow was in Tetzcuco, with her father. Moteczuma was furious but concealed his anger because he was afraid of Nezawal Pilli. Ixcawatzin, Xuchitl and Citlali had discussed the situation from the day Macuilmalinal had left for the war, and sent Ixcawatzin to Tetzcuco to seek Nezawal Pilli's advice. The king had suggested that, as soon as the news of her husband's death arrived in Mexico, Xuchitl should go to Tetzcuco without taking leave of the emperor. He, Nezawal Pilli, would take the responsibility for that.

It was not necessary for him, when the time came, to give any explanations to Moteczuma, because none were asked. The emperor felt too guilty for that. Xuchitl settled down to a spell of life in her paternal home after her brief experience in Tenochitlán. The old,

familiar place was very much the same, but for two important changes : the haunted apartments had been reopened, emptied of their gruesome contents and redecorated ; and the king had aged considerably.

From the very first days of her stay, Xuchitl observed that her father did not merely look older—he was not actually very old in point of age—but that he was inwardly letting go his grip on life. The fact struck her directly, though she did not know how or why. Nezawal Pilli, who had become more addicted to solitude than ever before, was nevertheless happy in his daughter's company. Xuchitl was the only person who had access to his inner mind. They used to sit together for hours, either in the king's gallery, overlooking the garden, or in some quiet and secluded spot of the garden, watching the water-fowl disporting themselves in the jasper-edged pools. Nezawal Pilli's heart was bitter against Moteczuma. "It is true," he said one day, "that, after all, he did but imitate my father. But my father wanted Azcal-xuchitl as his wife for ever, while he . . . he is a miserable dog, and I am ashamed of having elected him." From this mood of disgust and self-criticism, he passed on to a more general disenchantment. "We might have achieved some form of life better than this. But we needed time to get rid of the bloodthirsty ways of the Aztecs . . . Several sheaves of years, perhaps. We shan't have them. The Eastern men are coming. They will overpower us——"

"Why?" asked Xuchitl. And Nezawal Pilli answered : "Because they are coming. Those who come are always stronger than those who wait. That is why they come and we stay. And they will bring different gods and ways."

"But," retorted Xuchitl, "the ways they will bring may fit in with those you wish us to have ; that should make you happy." Nezawal Pilli mused over this for a while. "No," he answered at last, "for our ways, though new, would have been our ways, grown out of us. It would have been as a serpent which grows a new skin. They will just put new clothes on us. And they will not fit."

After this kind of conversation, Nezawal Pilli would remain silent for long ; his face would set into a mould of sadness and his eyes would shine with a light that made Xuchitl think of the sunset. He was a setting sun, and he knew it. He was perhaps the only man in the whole Anahuac fully aware of the historical tragedy which was soon to begin on the world's stage, a tragedy in which his country was to play the part of chief victim. He would cast farewell eyes on his palace, and the beautiful things it contained and on the general look of things, the colours and the shapes amidst which he had lived ; and from his observatory tower he beheld the lagoon and its white and brown cities doomed to a death and a transfiguration which his prophetic eyes were the only ones to see. He glanced at his sons, and guessed that Cacama

would fight like a brave, stubborn and unintelligent tiger to defend his country against the invaders ; and that the light-hearted, ambitious and impulsive Vanilla-Face would easily fall to the temptation of conquering a show of power by siding with the newcomers. What would become of Xuchitl ? That was very much in his mind. He expected the worst from Moteczuma and was fully aware that nothing but Moteczuma's fear of his own mythical magic powers stood between his passion and Xuchitl. But what would happen after his death ?

" Why don't you marry Ixcawatzin ? " he once asked her suddenly after a long silence. She was taken unawares, blushed and felt something in her which compelled her to hedge : " But he is a priest. He cannot marry me nor any one." The king was not looking at her. His eyes were far away, on the horizon, a habit he had developed of late, which deprived him of many opportunities for observation. That is why, instead of dropping the subject, as he would have done had he seen her answer as well as heard it, he replied : " That could easily be arranged." Xuchitl was still hedging. " But he does not want to marry me." And her father retorted : " He is devoted to you as no man in the world is. And from that to wanting to marry you, the distance is not great." There was no room left for hedging. So Xuchitl fought straight : " Father, I cannot marry him, because I am already in love." Nezawal Pilli turned round sharply as he had not done for years. " Are you ? " " Yes," answered Xuchitl quietly, " ever since I had that dream, I am in love with . . . him. And I know he will come."

Father and daughter remained in silence till the stars filled the skies with myriads of points of light.

16

This revelation closed the circle of Nezawal Pilli's solitude. His daughter, the only human being capable of understanding him, was already in communion with the Easterners who were coming to supersede him, to achieve what he had dreamt of doing, but more quickly and forcibly than he could have hoped to do it himself. She listened to him, understood him and sympathised with him ; but she was already one of the new country which was to rise on the soil of Anahuac over the ruins of the old, to which he belonged. His daughter was the first conquest of the Easterners.

Nezawal Pilli had no longer anything to do in the world. His task was over. The world had no longer need of him. Was he to stay just to eat and drink and have his fill of pleasures ? That was not his way.

When the labourer has finished his day's work, he goes home to rest. He would go home and rest. He felt he would not have to take his life. His life would ebb out of him the moment his spirit lay down.

One quiet night he summoned Ixcawatzin to his room. "You are a man who can keep a word locked up in his heart," he said to the young priest-soldier. Ixcawatzin noticed his grey hair and his deep, sad eyes. "I am going. I am leaving you for ever. Ixcawatzin, you are now twenty-three. Xuchitl is sixteen." The young man's heart beat quicker. For a moment he felt a thrilling fear of what he thought Nezawal Pilli was going to say. But Nezawal Pilli did not say it. "You know the dangers she runs while Moteczuma is in that state about her. It is important that she should be protected from those dangers till . . . till the new men come. I ask you to be her keeper after I am gone."

The young man was prompted to speak. He moved forward. The king held up his hand. "It is not as easy as it sounds, even for a brave man such as you are. There is Moteczuma's power, so much bigger than yours, and the indifference of her brothers. But there is also your own . . . interest in Xuchitl. Yes, I know you mean well. But the thing is there and needs to be watched. Ixcawatzin, I want you to swear that in every way and at every moment, you will do what you think best in Xuchitl's interest and not in yours, and that, when in doubt, you will do what she wants and not what you want."

The young soldier-priest frowned. "I shall always want what she wants." Nezawal Pilli smiled. "You are generous, but unwise. That is not the way things happen. Listen to an older man. Take the oath."

Ixcawatzin obeyed: "In the name of the Sun and of Our Lady the Earth, I shall not fail to act in Xuchitl's interest and, when in doubt, as she may direct. And in token of earnestness I eat this earth." He touched the floor and put his finger in his mouth.

17

A few days after this scene, Nezawal Pilli received a message from Moteczuma. The emperor wished to see him and to ask for his advice. Nezawal Pilli took to his canoe and went to Tenochtitlán. He found Moteczuma again in a state of utter dejection. "Have you not seen the signs?" asked the emperor. "Which signs, and of what?" asked the king. "Tetzcuco is not so far from the lagoon. Did you not see it rise and bubble as if it were boiling on a fire?" Nezawal Pilli said nothing. He had seen the lagoon bubble and had always suspected that it was over a fire, the chimney of which might be the Popocatepetl.

As he remained silent and unmoved, Moteczuma went on : " Surely, a sign of terrible novelties, and then, that frightful comet which came from the east, throwing off sparks in the night. Does not that show that disaster is coming from the East ? Tell me, father, you who know so much. I have consulted my magicians. They are stupid fellows and know nothing. I have had them sacrificed to Witchilopochtli. Let him protect us from death."

" From death ? " asked Nezawal Pilli. " There is no protection from death. Everything must die, even our gods." Moteczuma stared at him, terrified. " What are you saying, father ? What a blasphemy ! " But Nezawal Pilli remained unperturbed. " Even our gods must die if better ones take their place. New gods are coming from the East. I shall not see them, for I will soon be gone to my rest and this is my farewell visit to you. But you may still see the new gods and should make ready to receive them." He spoke without passion, as one who had detached himself from the issue and from any other issue as well. " Do what you may, they will overpower you. Face them like a man, and see that your people receive as little harm as possible in the change."

Moteczuma was not listening, nor, had he been listening, would he have understood. They did not speak the same idiom. Nezawal Pilli, though he did not know it, was a precursor of the new gods. He was a rationalist. Moteczuma was an adept of the old religion of omens, sacrifices and sortileges. He was weeping inwardly over his power threatened by a new power the more dreaded for being unknown, still more mysterious and magical than his own. Though he disliked Nezawal Pilli, and was afraid of him, the idea of being left in the world alone, without him, to face the new foe, filled him with terror. " And when are you thinking of dying ? " he asked with selfish naïvete. Nezawal Pilli smiled. " Soon. Very soon. My time is coming." Bitterly Moteczuma remarked, " A warrior never leaves the battlefield before the fight." " This is no war," answered Nezawal Pilli, cold and calm. " This is a New Fire. Make ready, Moteczuma, make ready. It may still be kindled on your panting heart."

" Where shall I go ? " asked the unfortunate monarch. " I am no coward. You know it. But if this is no war—" Nezawal Pilli glanced at him with pity. " Courage is necessary for every occasion and not merely for war. You are the head of this people. Lead them towards the new gods." Moteczuma begged : " Stay and help me ! " And Nezawal Pilli felt the force of the emperor's request, yet he knew his life was over. It was not a matter of courage, but of vital stream. He shook his head. " I would if I could. But my time has come."

Nezawal Pilli threw his arms round the neck of the emperor and went out with slow yet firm steps from that palace he was never to see again.

Three-Reeds came one morning to see the king in the royal working-room, at the usual hour. The king was not there. This puzzled the chief steward greatly, for Nezawal Pilli was most regular and punctual and had never been known to alter his time-table. The only change which Three-Reeds had noticed of late, was that the king had begun again to wear the heart of jade which he had set aside for some time after the death of the ghost. He used now to put it on every night as he went up to his observatory where he remained for long hours alone. Three-Reeds waited for a while and as the king did not appear, he suspected that he might have remained in the tower. Perhaps he had fallen asleep up there in the open, while watching the stars. He climbed the steep steps of the tower. The king was sitting peaceably on his reed-chair, with his head resting on the back of the seat, as if watching the sky. Three-Reeds had often seen him in that position, but this time he noticed that the king made no movement when he entered. He tiptoed round the chair. The king's eyes were open but their light had gone out. Three-Reeds noticed that he was not wearing the heart of jade. "And yet," he thought, "he had it on last night."

That morning, Ixcawatzin went to see Xuchitl and broke the news to her. She had expected it for some time, had read it so to speak, in her father's eyes. Had she not been possessed of a firm belief in the coming of the Eastern man she had seen in her dreams, she would probably have been overwhelmed by this death which left her alone in the world—but for Ixcawatzin whose loyalty she took as a matter of course. As it was, she felt the acute pain of the loss, but remained outwardly calm.

"Ixcawatzin, there is one service I would ask you above all others. You must secure the heart of jade for me." His eyes shone with a sombre fire. "I shall," he said.

He offered his help to Three-Reeds to prepare the body for the stately funeral. In conversation with the steward he gathered the two chief facts about the magic jewel: the king was wearing it the night before, when he had gone up to the tower; he was no longer wearing it when Three-Reeds found him dead. Ixcawatzin broke off the conversation. He did not want to reveal that it was his intention to find the heart of jade; and moreover he knew all he could learn from Three-Reeds. With a deep insight into the workings of the king's mind, he came to the conclusion that the king had the heart of jade in his mouth. Ixcawatzin was even sure that this was precisely the reason why Nezawal Pilli had been wearing it round his neck of late every

time he went to the tower. As he had a foreboding of his coming death, he wanted to have it handy to put it in his mouth when his last hour should arrive.

Ixcawatzin asked leave to watch the body.

The king's body had been dressed with mantle after mantle, chosen amongst the best he had worn in his ceremonial days. On his head, from which the funeral lock had been cut off by Three-Reeds, a crown of paper had been set, and a mask of a mosaic of turquoises had been laid on his face. The body was tied to a throne with thick bands of henequen paper, and four braziers of copal incense were set ablaze in the four corners of the hall.

Ixcawatzin stood by the side of the body while the chief dignitaries of the State and the envoys from the neighboring kingdoms came successively to offer food, flowers and slaves for the king's journey, with long farewell speeches addressed to the dead king as if he were present. The young soldier-priest was brooding over his plight. How was he to get hold of the heart of jade? He held strongly to the view that no one should ever desecrate a dead body before it has been freed by fire; but that was *his* view. Xuchitl wanted the heart of jade and he had sworn to the king that he would always follow Xuchitl's wishes and not his own. The long procession of solemn official visitors had ceased. It was midnight. Three-Reeds had begged him to remain alone watching the body while he went to his room for a brief sleep, for he was exhausted. Ixcawatzin had about two hours of liberty to act as he thought best. What was best? He glanced at the king. The king was hidden under a turquoise mask. What was best? What did the king think under his mask? This gave him a plausible pretext to take off the mask from the king's face. The noble features he knew well were now bare, serene, mat and waxy, aloof and indifferent to Ixcawatzin's quest. He carried on his inner fight for a while, then under a compulsion from within, he seized the king's jaw and pulled hard. The muscles yielded, the bones held fast, and a double line of terrible, serrated teeth barred the way to the young man's purpose. He was not daunted. Having dared to lay his hands on that august face, he fought on, pulled this way and that, endeavouring to beat the obdurate resistance of the body. The body held fast. The mouth was shut for good and all and would not let go its treasure. Exhausted in body and spirit, Ixcawatzin laid the mask on again and was relieved to hide from his eyes the face he had desecrated. He stood on motionless, all save his heart, which beat feverishly in his chest. From that huge, still, rigid mass, within which he sensed the king's body, a reproach seemed to rise and hit him directly even now when the mask again covered the face.

At dawn Three-Reeds returned and sent Ixcawatzin to rest. He

fell asleep as soon as he lay on his couch. But by midday he was again at his post. He was more and more concerned about his rash promise to Xuchitl. As he was stubborn, he requested to be one of those who would watch the body during cremation, at the four corners of the funeral pyre. The ceremony began at sunset. By midnight Ixcawatzin was still faithfully standing at his post. On a thick layer of copal incense which burnt on top of the pyre, the king's funeral mass sat on his reed-chair covered with his tiger-skin, wearing his twenty mantles and his mask. The paper crown had burnt long ago and his chair and tiger-skin were no more than brittle shapes of charcoal. But he remained poised in a sitting position by the mere mass of his twenty mantles and by the numerous bands of thick, heavily glued paper, within which he was packed. The fire had gradually made a slippery surface slanting down from his chest to his feet and down the front of the pyre, a surface which the molten copal incense and the glue from the mantles and papers had made even. Ixcawatzin was suddenly shaken out of a trance by the ringing noise of an object which fell on the copper sheet on the ground, in front of the fire. He glanced down, stooped quickly and hid in his hand the heart of jade. Then he looked up. The king was still masked. But under the mask, the mouth had let go its prey.

19

Ixcawatzin held the magic jewel in his left hand, tight, tighter than necessary, nervously tight, so that the golden chain and the edges of the stone were driving themselves right into his skin; the whole heart of jade was impressing itself into his hand, into his body, beating, throbbing in his heated blood, stirring his whole being with a deep, earthy rhythm he had never known before, arousing in his senses desires he had ever dreaded, lifting in the mid-air of his drowsy dreams visions he had always feared and kept at bay, visions of forbidden bliss and of sinful experience such as he had never beheld ever since once, only once, never again, he had attended the orgies of the Cuicoyan, the house of the Joy of Women, where the young warriors and the beauties of the city danced together more and more licentiously as the evening went on till the dance ended in a universal and promiscuous sacrifice to the Goddess of Carnal Love. . . . All the visions of that day, when in feverish chastity he had beheld a crowd of men and women violently tossed by the most ruthless storms of the flesh, were now rising in space, not outside, where he could keep them at bay and watch them from afar, but in his inner space, where they overpowered him, became him and turned him into a vision and a

passion, a desire and a storm and an aching flesh. He was trembling from head to foot, holding fast the magic jewel inside his palm, wounded by its sharp edges, bleeding, bathing the heart with his one-time chaste, now hot, lascivious blood. His mind, heart, body had turned to Xuchitl with a tension so savage and tormenting that, merely in order to relieve it, he left his stand by the body—an unheard-of thing at which the other three watchers could not believe their eyes—and ran desperately towards Xuchitl's bedroom. He crossed the deserted halls, soft-footed like some thirsty feline beast stealing across the quiet forest to his secret water-pool, with throbbing heart and phosphorescent eyes . . . passed all doors and lifted all curtains, till at last, hardly able to stand, he leant on the door-frame of Xuchitl's bedroom, lifting the door-curtain with his left hand which held the Heart of Jade within its tight grip, while he passed his right hand over his feverish head where the blood hammered boldly at his temples. Xuchitl was asleep, hardly covered. She slept naked, as was the general custom in those days, save in religious houses. Her back was silky and bluish with moonlight, while the volumes of her face and breasts shone with a reddish, warm glow, coming from a distant torch. She was breathing peacefully and her form moved with the healthy quiet beat of life, a rhythm which far from finally destroying Ixcawatzin's balance, gradually restored him to self-mastery. His agitated heart seemed secretly to seek unison with that heart which beat so quietly under his eyes. Time went by. He advanced on tiptoe, towards the bed, drew close to Xuchitl, laid the heart of jade just by her breast, which rested softly on the cotton wrap, and vanished back towards the post of trust which he had abandoned for a while.

PART IX

ALONSO BECOMES A NATIVE GOD, RESIGNS, AND BECOMES A CHRISTIAN SAINT

I

THE WARRIORS who had overpowered Moteczuma's calpixques spoke a language which Alonso could not understand. They seemed to him of a different cast than either Moteczuma's subjects, the calpixques, or Long Face, for instance, or the men he had seen on the coast. While they were putting away the booty, he remained watching events and trying to wash and bandage Long Face's leg, wounded by an arrow.

Long Face whispered to him that their captors were Otomies, a wild tribe which had always resisted Moteczuma's endeavours to reduce them to obedience. They were men, said Long Face, good for war, but lazy for work, who worshipped a strange god known as Yocipa. While thus busy Alonso kept his eye on the Otomies. They were strong, sturdy men, simply clad, well armed and decorated with stone or metal pieces stuck through holes pierced in their ears and lower lips. Three of them were having a parley which, to judge by their gestures, had something to do with Long Face. It was in fact a debate as to whether it was worth while keeping him alive, since he would delay their return home. The decision went against Long Face and one of the three came forward with resolute steps towards the wounded man and drew his heavy wooden sword edged with sharp obsidian knives, to finish him off by severing his head from his body.

But as the Otomi lifted his sword, Alonso sprang to his feet and stood between him and Long Face with a determined air which paralysed the native warrior. This should have been Alonso's last moment on this complicated planet, but it was not, for human logic is just the art of following up a particular way of thinking ; it has nothing to say as to which way it is to be. The Otomies thought that, since Alonso, who had no weapon whatsoever, dared stand up to an armed man, himself surrounded by armed companions, he must possess supernatural powers, a fact which his golden hair and blue eyes plainly suggested. So the warrior cast his eyes down, walked away and murmured some cryptic phrases about gods and Yocipa, so that his companions should not take him for an ordinary coward.

One of the tlamemes knew the Otomi language well enough to act as an interpreter. The warriors came towards Alonso and spoke to him respectfully. "They want to know whether you give them leave to return home with all this booty," explained the tlameme in Nauatl. "They promise to offer you some of it in the teocalli." Alonso was puzzled at first. He took this sudden change in the situation as the outcome of a timely intervention on the part of the Lord, and answered the request as if it had been a matter of pure courtesy to a friendly stranger ; he said that he would not leave till his companion's wound was dressed. He went on with his surgical work, and, when the wound had been washed and bandaged, came to the conclusion that Long Face could not walk. He made the Otomies hand him two spears and with some of the rich cotton wraps from the booty and some straps of leather, he improvised a stretcher. There was a difficulty : who would be the bearer ? The tlamemes were already carrying as much as they could manage. Alonso ordered one of the warriors to take one end, and he himself took the other. The caravan started on its way to the Otomi settlement.

They arrived at sunset. The whole population was waiting for them with a curiosity whetted by the couriers who had brought news of the victory and of the wonderful new man or god. Alonso was struck by the mixture of luxury and of misery which the small town or big village evinced ; gold and chalchiwitl jewels were worn and shawls and shoes seemed excellent, but the houses were hardly better than primitive and uncomfortable straw huts. He was received by Olayetl, the Chief, a powerful looking warrior who wore a chalchiwitl on his lower lip, and by the chief priest, or Tecutlato, who wore nothing but a long white cloak and could be smelt at a long distance for what he was. They accompanied him to the chief teocalli, the only house in the place with some finish about it, and there they bid him to stay. Alonso made it clear that Long Face was to stay with him.

The two heads of the community eyed the golden-haired stranger with the utmost curiosity. They were anxious to find out whether he was a mere man or a god ; and the high priest, more familiar than his companion with the traditions of the Mexicans, wondered also whether he might not be Quetzalcoatl in person or one of his emissaries. They began by offering him food : a stew of mice and snakes with tomatoes and axi, and some maize tortillas. Alonso refused the stew and ate the maize, and this self-denial greatly enhanced his chances of being accepted as a god by both warrior and priest. The warrior, however, Olayetl, was of a Voltairian turn of mind, and he quietly suggested to the priest that before committing themselves to actual worship, they should submit the white stranger to the two chief temptations of men : gold and women.

For the time being, however, they left him alone. At frequent intervals a meal was served him, always of a vegetarian character. Alonso spent his days recovering, resting and attending to his companion, whose wound was rapidly closing owing mostly to the fact that Alonso had not enough surgical knowledge to hinder nature's work. The leaders of the Otomi community had shrewdly guessed that Alonso would refuse to enter into any plans until his companion had fully recovered. When, however, they saw Long Face moving about freely in their midst, Olayetl and the chief priest called on Alonso and explained to him that there was a load of gold which had to be conveyed to another Otomi settlement, two journeys away from theirs, and that there was no other person they could better trust with such a delicate mission. The weight was no heavier than what Long Face could carry and if the two men could undertake the mission, it was

better that they should have no escort in order to avoid raising suspicions as to the value of the load they were conveying.

These somewhat long explanations were of course given in Otomi. The interpreter translated them into Nauatl. But he had just begun when Alonso turned to Long Face and asked: "What is *teocuitlatl*?" Long Face pointed to Olayetl's ears and said: "The earth (he meant the substance, the metal) with which his ear-ornaments are made." Olayetl was wearing two heavy ear-pendants of gold. Now, *teocuitlatl*, as Alonso already knew, literally meant "excrement of the gods." He was dumbfounded. What! The Aztec people felt towards gold exactly as he himself had felt all his life since that day in his father's study which he hated to remember! Gold, the excrement of the gods, the filthy-divine thing, left by the gods amongst men so that they should murder each other for the possession of this sterile refuse! Alonso glanced at the priest and the warrior without seeing them. He was living one of those moments of dazzling illumination which suddenly made the world clear to him, as lightning in the night. The priest glanced at the warrior knowingly. "A god, to be sure," said his glance. "See how he vanishes from our presence, leaving only his shell for us to see. Let us wait till he returns." The warrior, though impressed, smiled incredulously.

"Well," said Alonso at last, somewhat impatiently, as he emerged from his dreamy recollections, "what about it?" The interpreter explained again, "Very good. We shall convey the *teocuitlatl*. I must have Long Face with me and one of you as a guide. And I want a spear and a buckler."

3

They left that morning. Olayetl winked at the high priest: "He is the only one who goes armed. He will kill the guide, I know. That is why I have given him that good-for-nothing, whom I wanted to get rid of. He will kill the guide and run away with the gold." The high priest answered: "No. He will come back. He does not like gold. Did you notice that he did not touch it?" Olayetl replied, "We shall see. I have given the guide detailed instructions for my brother. I want him to try the white man or god or whatever he is with the temptation of temptations—woman." And the high priest, who was also malicious, though on a deeper level than the warrior, pointed out: "That only shows that you are not as sure as you say that he will kill the guide."

Meanwhile Alonso, Long Face and the guide had ventured forth on a trackless, broken country, stony, arid, empty yet not without

greatness. They were well provided with food and relied for their water on the frequent fresh brooks which, leaping from rock to rock, brought down the melted snow from the heights to the valleys below. Long-Face carried a load of about twenty pounds of gold in small ingots of a shape and size very much like chocolate tablets, wrapped up in a thick henequen cloth and tied up with leather-straps. After a day of difficult climbing up a ridge and an even more difficult descent down an almost precipitous granite wall, the small expedition came within sight of the Otomi settlement ruled by Olayetl's brother, Olotl ; the end of their journey. It shone in the sun which turned the straw of its numerous huts into gold. They were rapidly descending towards hotter lands and Alonso saw with some pleasure that the settlement was built within a short distance of a lake, which was at that time peaceful, luminous and blue, like a slice of heaven fallen on earth. They arrived in the village that same afternoon. The guide led them direct to Olotl's house, and after a long and circumstantial conversation with him, Olotl turned to Alonso and pointed at the gold. Alonso ordered Long Face to deliver the metal. The chief cacique studied the strange man with the same mixture of puzzlement, curiosity and respect which the unheard of appearance of the Spaniard had caused everywhere. He led Alonso to the teocalli—just in case he turned out to be divine—and provided him with good quarters and food. Then, he went about the other business : he was to engineer the chief temptation.

The girl had first to be chosen. He had no hesitation about that. If there was an irresistible woman in the settlement, who doubted but that she was Tlali ? How many hearts had she broken already ? He himself, had he not felt bound by his high function in the community to some self-restraint . . . Tlali should do it, and if the golden-haired stranger withstood Tlali's charms, no further proof would be required that he was a god. After Olotl had made up his mind, he remembered that Tlali, who had been the mistress of an Aztec warrior, knew the Nauatl language—an added weapon in her arsenal. She was summoned and put through her paces. She was to do everything in her power to break down the stranger's chastity.

Tlali went to business in all earnestness. She was young and comely. She had long, black hair, cut short over the forehead, but worn long behind over her back. She wore obsidian ear-pieces, stuck through big holes in her ear-lobes. Her neck, chest, breasts and arms were tattooed with light blue arabesques. She decided to try Alonso first in the afternoon, when the day would be at its hottest, and she might expect him to be languorous and susceptible. She went home and made most elaborate preparations. She painted her teeth black, a touch of feminine refinement which few Otomi young men could

resist ; then she covered her face with a foundation of yellow cream, over which she painted her cheeks bright red. She chose a huipil of white cotton, cut low in front in a V shape, and embroidered in a liberally open design so that her tattooed breasts should be clearly seen and appreciated ; on her arms and legs she stuck red feathers by means of a paste of wild honey. Being a woman of fastidious tastes, who could appreciate the value of simplicity, she decided to wear no jewels whatever. She cast a last glance at herself in the polished stone-mirror: "Now," she thought, "I have still to meet the man who could resist this."

Alonso had fallen asleep in the main yard of the teocalli. He was still floating in a fluid, undefined world, still on the sea of sleep, close to the coast of waking, wondering what that bright yellow surface which stood facing him under the hot sun could be, beginning even to guess it might be the temple wall which faced the shaded gallery where he was asleep, when he suddenly beheld a strange figure cutting a silhouette of variegated colours on that yellow sunny background. It was like nothing he had seen before : black at the top, then yellow and red, with a streak of black across it, then blue, then white, then red again. What was it ? He could not make it out. Obviously a bird, a red bird, with a woman's face. Suddenly the vision began to shake with laughter from head to foot, making the red feathers on her arms and legs vibrate as if under the action of the wind. "Perhaps a laughing bird," he half-dreamt. He gave it up, as one gives up dreams, rather annoyed when they become too absurd even for dreams, and went to sleep again. No easy thing, though. There seemed to be flies about, many, heavy, persistent flies, tickling his hair. Would he lift his hand ? It was heavy with sleep, and his arm felt so comfortable lying on the soft cotton wrap. Lift ? Who could lift an arm when it was so hot and one was so sleepy ? Confound the flies ! . . . But . . . are they flies ? Rather big and heavy. Suppose they were bigger beasts, beetles, or mice or some of those unpleasant things that swarm in hot countries. . . . He made an effort to summon enough energy to lift that arm. The spring of his will acted at last. He drew his hand to his hair and caught another hand.

Alonso woke up to find Tlali lying by his side. She was the woman-bird he had seen in his dreams, whose arms and legs were feathered in bright red colours. She was half lying alongside him, resting on an elbow and caressing his hair. She smiled, showing a double row of teeth, perfect in shape, but ink-black.

"Awake, at last !" she said in Nautl. She had a sweet, piping voice. "Who are you ?" he asked, sitting up. "Oh, don't get up. Lie down. You have nothing to do," suggested the enchantress. "Who are you ?" he asked again, with a slight touch of impatience

which did not escape her attention. "Your companion while you are with us. It is our custom," she lied boldly, "to grant our guests a woman to make their stay agreeable while they are with us. I am your woman for the time being." Alonso was taken in by this plausible explanation. He could not help feeling a strong repulsion to the misguided efforts of the Otomi beauty, her black teeth, her red feathers; but he was an earnest soul and his mental glance penetrated through these irrelevant externals to the intention behind them, which, so far as he believed, was pure. He looked at her with affable eyes in which Tlali read more success than she was really achieving.

"Come," she said, putting her arm round his neck. "Let us lie down together." Now that she had recovered from the access of irresistible mirth which had shaken her at the sight of his golden hair and his pink skin, she was beginning to find him handsome, well built, strong and in every way desirable. He took hold of her hand, freed his neck from the feathered arm which was tickling him uncomfortably on that hot day and laid her hand firmly on her feathered leg. "No. . . . What is your name?" She was surprised and answered "Tlali." She was pleased at his curiosity. "No, Tlali. You are a *chalchiwitl* of a girl," her eyes shone with pride, "but I need no companion. Tell the chief that I am grateful but wish to be left alone."

He leapt to his feet and disappeared from her sight.

4

Tlali called on the chief to report progress. He was not pleased. She suggested that she might be given another chance by night, when the goddess of love is stronger. But Olotl had other ideas and sent her away. He was sure that Tlali had been a wrong choice, perhaps because her name was not propitious, perhaps also because she knew too much. "Men," he thought, "are often more susceptible to innocence than to knowledge in women." He summoned a virgin whose name, *Icniuhyotl*, seemed to him of good omen, for it meant *friendship* in Aztec. (It was then the fashion for Otomi girls to bear Aztec names.) His plan was more elaborate and he imparted it to *Icniuhyotl*, with strict injunctions to carry it out till victory had been obtained.

This done, he went to see Alonso with the interpreter. He explained to Alonso that it was customary for the settlement to ask their guests to spend a whole night by the lake on a spot which would be pointed out to him and which was haunted by the lake-goddess. This goddess assumed the shape of a young woman and sometimes appeared and sometimes did not appear to the visitor. If she were not to appear to

him, he would come back the next day and report the fact, the omen of which was indifferent. If she were to appear to him, two things might happen : she might lie with him or she might not. If she lay with him, there would be prosperity for the settlement ; but if she did not, this would betoken all kinds of disasters for the life of the settlement as the outcome of the stranger's visit.

Alonso listened to this tale with the supercilious assurance of a grown-up towards a child ; a mood not very far distant from that in which Olotl was telling it to him. " And does she often appear ? " he asked, half humorously. " Very seldom. Never yet once since I am the chief." Alonso smiled. Yet another of the numberless superstitions of those benighted heathens in which Long Face had been instructing him. " Very well. When must I spend that night by the lake ? "

It was decided to send him that very night. He was given a guide, a hammock and food. He left for his adventure at nightfall. The air was warm and laden with the aroma of flowers, gradually superseded by the damp odour of the lake as he came closer to its shores. Over the water, here and there, swarms of tiny phosphorescent insects made minute firmaments of their own which the dark waters reflected with delight. The guide showed Alonso the appointed spot and left him.

Alonso settled down to a night of solitude and silence, one of the enjoyments of life which he appreciated most highly. He had spotted a tree which would provide him with a solid back for sitting in comfort on the earth, facing the lake. He was almost on a level with the water, on a shore of brown pebbles which were dragged up and down with the wavelets—ultimate consequences of far-off motions which came to die at his feet. As he sat listening to them, the moon rose in the sky on the other side of the water, and a streak of silver, at times broken into numberless silver blades, crossed the black water in a straight line from the moon to him. He glanced at the planet and nodded with gratitude. It was as if the moon had said : " I am here, with you."

" The same moon," he mused, " which shines on the lovely nights of Torremala in the summer days of Spain." His thoughts went back to his mother, who by now, after so long without news, had probably gone through the agony of believing him dead. How far away those Spanish days seemed. Alonso drew his hand to his chest and grasped in his fingers the silver medal with the Virgin and Child which his mother had given him and which he always had worn ever since through his many dramatic vicissitudes. Would he ever see Spain again ? Was he condemned to perish in that strange country into which he had strayed, useless, wasted, without even the consolation of knowing that his death had served to promote the truth of Christ ? The thought filled him with dismay. He suddenly realised that he had allowed

himself to be separated from Long Face, his only sure companion in the alien world in which he lived so precariously.

Yet he was strong, young and brave, and thoughts of fear and doubt never dwelt in him for long. It was a lovely night. The lake was quiet and cool, though the air was warm and languorous; and the moon imparted to everything, trees, hills and even the wide firmament above, a dreamy, contemplative serenity. Its bluish light seemed to fall on the landscape like an impalpable powder which shone on every surface and which the water of the lake softly dissolved.

"They are odd with their lake-goddess!" he smiled, thinking of the Otomi natives. "If there were such a thing; she ought to be made of waves and moonlight, suddenly incarnated, when for some reason or other she needed to step on this hard earth, so that the waves would become her limbs and the moonlight would go into her eyes." As he dreamt, he was looking at the streak of moonlight in the lake. It seemed to him that the waves were now and then more definite than their liquid nature warranted; more persistent. What was it? There! In the midst of the liquid silver, was not that an arm? . . . a shoulder? . . . and—is it possible?—a lovely breast surging out of the water to be kissed by a ray of the moon, shining under the moon for an instant and disappearing again? . . . His heart was beating faster and his eyes, though still incredulous, were asking for more beauty, more delight.

From the silvery river which flowed towards him, the goddess rose and stood in front of him. Her body was shining with water and the moon, which lit her from behind, made an edge of blue light round her lovely profile. She stood motionless. She was little and perfect. Alonso had never seen a more lovely thing, nor dreamt it either. She altered the poise of her stance and, resting on her left foot, slightly lifted her right foot and bent her knee, and in so doing, turned ever so little, yet enough for the moonlight to peer above her left shoulder, throwing a veil of light over her round small breasts.

Instinctively Alonso touched the medal of the Virgin and Child on his chest, whether it was to seek protection or for some more obscure reason, some feeling that love at last was being "announced" to him, who could tell? He drank in the vision almost in ecstasy and would have paid with his life for the joy of beholding it longer and longer still. The lake-goddess did not move. She just was. Alonso was under a spell; as if he had been suddenly spirited away on to another planet, in which this fastidious process of constant doing and undoing had sunk into dust, so that creatures were free to enjoy the bliss of living.

How long was he in this paradise? Minutes perhaps, perhaps hours. The moon had had time to rise higher and turn round the goddess, who was now a statue of silvery blue and watery blue. "She looks eighteen," thought Alonso. And he noticed that her nose was

small and her lips were full and that her teeth were white, for she smiled faintly now and then. And as she smiled at him, in a most insinuating fashion, the spell was broken. He had been holding the medal of the Mother and Child in his fingers all the time, but had not been aware of it. Suddenly, for no special reason, the profile of the Virgin impressed itself on his finger so clearly that he actually saw the image through his skin. The effect was quick as lightning. He fell on his knees and began to cross himself and to exorcise the lake-goddess with the sign of the Cross. He was convinced that the lovely vision was an incarnation of the Devil; one of those figures which the Evil One dangles before the anchorites to test their virtue. *Vade retro*, he murmured.

Instinct told Icnihyotl that things were turning awry. She moved forward and drew close to Alonso, so close that he could touch her. And, such is the power of the Devil, while he had remained pure in his pagan ecstasy, before a lake-goddess, he fell into the hell of hot desire as soon as he re-entered his Christian conscience, and with trembling hands, caressed the body which was offered to him by the Evil One. The spell of the flesh was rapidly overpowering him and Icnihyotl smiled, more and more pleased with herself.

How little she knew the true source of her power! Who could have been able to explain to her that she had only begun to be dangerous for Alonso when his imagination had transfigured her from an inexistent lake-goddess into an inexistent temptation of the Devil? Her body was being caressed by Alonso not because it was the lovely body of a healthy, young girl, for Alonso knew he could always resist that victoriously, but because he mistook it for a creature of the Devil which he imagined to be wellnigh irresistible. So, feeling that he became more and more tender and intimate, being already sure that she had won, Icnihyotl made a fatal mistake: she put her arms round his neck and with the sweetest, tenderest voice from her heart moved by genuine love, endeared him in her native Otomi.

For the second time the spell was broken. Alonso had picked up enough Otomi to realise that she had spoken words of that language. So, after all, she was neither a lake-goddess nor a devilish hallucination. Alonso knew full well that the Devil, who has as keen an intellect as any angel, was not likely to try to tempt him with a vision who spoke nothing but Otomi. She was a girl, one of the girls of the settlement who would laugh at him the next day. The chief had played him a trick, for some obscure reason, perhaps to get rid of him, have him drowned in the lake. His desire had died out. He was ruminating his position without fear, but without enthusiasm. The moon had moved round and withdrawn all her silver tracery from the lake. The girl was waiting awkwardly, unable to understand how she had lost him when

she was on the point of winning him. He laid the hammock between two trees, took her in his arms as if she were a child and laid her in the hammock. Then he sat down by the tree and settled himself patiently to wait for dawn.

When he woke up, the sun was streaming over the waters. He found that the lake was blue, free from weeds and from aquatic animals; though he could see small fishes sporting themselves in the clear water. The girl had disappeared. He bathed. He ate some tortillas of maize which he had in his bag. And when he was preparing to return and wondering how, for he did not know the way, Long Face arrived. He explained to Alonso that the settlement had come to the conclusion that he was a god. Alonso smiled and said, "I will do my best."

5

He found the whole settlement waiting for him, with wreaths of flowers and an imposing battery of wooden drums. He was taken to the teocalli, decked and crowned with flowers and offered a meal which, they knew by now, had to be vegetarian. Alonso, who would have loved to eat a roast hen, thought it wiser to stick to maize. After the feast, he was offered a slave caught in battle and the usual preparations were gone through to have him sacrificed. Alonso grew uneasy at the sight of the victim's face. "What is afoot?" he asked Long Face, who, familiar with the proceedings, gave him a full and accurate report of what he was to expect. Alonso at once directed the interpreter to explain that no life was ever to be sacrificed to him. The high priest was much put out at this, but Olotl, who was a resourceful man, ordered the whole battery of wooden drums to roar at once, so as to cover the retreat of the representatives of the only true religion for the Otomies.

There was some parleying between the two brothers Olotl and Olayetl as to which settlement was to keep the god; in the end it was decided to submit the matter to him. His decision was as wise as might have been expected of his divine nature: he would spend the six hot months with his worshippers in the cold country and the six cold months with his worshippers in the hot country. For the time being, therefore, he remained in the hot country settlement. He ordered a new teocalli to be built for him on a knoll close to the village, for he was unable to withstand the stench and the gore of the old temple. As time went by, he became a kind of spiritual chief of the two Otomi tribes, to whom the two brother calpixques came to submit all their difficulties.

Alonso never lost sight of his faith. He was earnest in his desire to live according to the tenets of Christ, and was convinced that it was the hand of the Lord which had raised him from the larder of the first native chief by the river to the teocalli in which he now was living as a god, or as he put it to himself, from flesh to spirit. In his long hours of meditation which he treasured so much, he pondered over his situation, wondering what he could do to deserve it in the eyes of the Lord Who had given it to him. Had he been greedy or sensuous or both, he would have been able to amass a fortune and to put a harem together. He felt an irrational repugnance for gold and had solemnly taken a vow of chastity to atone for a mortal sin. Yet this self-denial was but the negative side of his prestige. He had to do something out of his own substance as well. True, there were the wars. As the spiritual head of his community, he had restrained his subjects from undertaking several fights which seemed to him unjust. In so doing, he had endangered his reputation and strained his worshippers' faith more than he realised. The Otomies had not yet attained the phase of abstract moral laws and lived by omens and auguries. They were therefore apt to find his ethical arguments somewhat recondite, and when they did not accept them merely as the pronouncements of an oracle, there was always a risk that they might misinterpret them as lack of courage. He was, however, saved from such a disaster by his own warlike instinct. His hands itched for a sword and he dreamt of horses. His objections to war became less pronounced as time went by and in the end he yielded and took part in a number of battles against neighbouring peoples. His mere presence, let alone his personal valour, was enough to put to flight even the most formidable enemies of the Otomies, and after a number of these encounters his reputation as a god spread far beyond the frontiers of his adopted people.

These military services, however, did not seem to him to possess enough value in themselves to appease his Christian conscience. He worked hard to master the language so as to be able to preach the Gospel to the natives. But meanwhile? . . . He had a happy inspiration one day, as he watched a long file of tlamemes heavily laden with maguey-palms, with earthenware pots full of maguey juice for distillation and other similar loads, struggling towards the settlement from the distant field. Since he had landed in that strange land, he had not seen a single wheel. What a boon wheels could be for a country without draught animals! He would build a wheelbarrow. That humble instrument which he had sometimes pushed along as a boy in his father's garden, became now for him a symbol of spiritual service: it would relieve the burden of many thousands of aching men.

He drew his plans carefully, bestowing the minutest attention on every detail, particularly on the shape and materials for the wheel.

He felt somewhat handicapped by the fact that iron was unknown. He wanted metal for the wheel rim and also for the axle and hubs. He found a fairly good coppersmith, who had learnt his art in Mexico and spoke Nauatl, a double advantage. He surrounded his work with the utmost mystery, to safeguard himself against the loss of prestige of a failure which he could not altogether dismiss, and also, to make his success more impressive, if he were to succeed. Carpenters and coppersmiths made only detached pieces: he was always alone when assembling them. After a number of disappointments, he at last succeeded in constructing a useful and even elegant barrow, with copper hubs and rims, axle and handle-bars.

He presented his gift to the community in the course of a solemn ceremony. He called the whole settlement together and, through the interpreter, for he did not trust himself yet to speak in public, he explained that it was his desire to ease the burden of the tlamemes. He noticed that the audience looked puzzled. They were all sitting or standing in the meadow in front of his teocalli. Why help the tlamemes? No one could understand why a god should take the trouble to ease the burden of the tlamemes. Everybody knew that tlamemes were born to carry weights. He guessed their thoughts and changed his argument. If you ease the burden of the tlameme, he can carry more weight with the same effort, and therefore you will not need so many tlamemes and you will not spend so much maize in feeding them. They liked that. They glanced at each other with approval and a wave of rumorously acceptance ran through the audience.

Then he made ten tlamemes lift a heap of stones which he had prepared by his doorway. When each had as much as he could carry, he uncovered the barrow hidden under a cotton sheet and made the men unload the stones gently into it, giving them instructions how to place them so as to keep a good balance. The wheelbarrow was now fully loaded. He chose the smallest tlameme and, through the interpreter explained to the crowd: "This man will now take all the stones back to the heap at once." There was an outburst of laughter. That could not be done, not even by a god. Alonso instructed the man to take hold of the handlebars. The tlameme looked at him and at the barrow, frightened of both the man and the thing. He shook his head. No. He would not risk it. Alonso was reluctant to push the wheelbarrow himself, for he did not want the crowd to take it as a miracle. He called on Long Face and explained to him how he was to make the barrow move. Not without some hesitation, Long Face lifted the handle-bars, but he overrated the effort that would be needed so much that on his vigorous shove, the wheelbarrow shot forward at top speed, lost balance and fell sideways, spilling its load of stones on the way.

The crowd was hilarious. But Olotl had grasped the importance of that epoch-making invention. He stepped forward, called a slave he had by him and ordered him to sit inside the barrow, which the slave did, pale with fear. Then Olotl in person lifted the handles, pushed the barrow gently forward and took his slave for a ride which the poor man was unable to enjoy, being possessed with as much fear as the first peaceful pedestrian who was taken aboard an airplane. This time the crowd was impressed.

6

The gift of the wheelbarrow was the final consecration of Alonso as the god of the tribe. There was no people in the whole proud Anahuac which could boast of this thing the unruly Otomies could now exhibit with pride—a wheel. Alonso had by now a complete set of accurate measurements and models which enabled him to mount several wheelbarrows with pieces made on his instructions by carpenters and smiths. None were as luxurious and elegant as the first, which he had given to Olotl, but all were useful, and he presented them to the most influential members of the community. The possession of a wheelbarrow soon became one of the indispensable features of the Otomi nobility.

Competition is never a sound basis for friendship. The "priest of the cult of Yocipa frowned at the modern invention, which would not fail to corrupt the healthy and simple habits of their ancient community by rendering life too easy and giving men the illusion that he can shake off his burden by merely shifting it on to a round piece of wood more or less rimmed with metal. But Alonso, quiet and self-possessed on his hill, went on with his plans, bent on bestowing upon this people the gifts which they were entitled to expect from their chosen god.

He noticed that amongst the Otomies the lighting of a fire was a most tedious operation requiring long and persevering efforts to raise sparks by friction between two dry sticks. He bethought himself of the Old World method by which a fire could be lit striking sparks out of a piece of flint with some hard metal. He found good flint for his purpose in the neighbourhood, but the hardest metal at his disposal was copper. He was not very successful at first, but later, with a different kind of copper, probably not very pure, brought to him from another district, he had the joy of striking fire and of lighting a cotton wick with it. He prepared a yarn of gay red cotton wick, a handsome piece of this new hard copper, which he made up in the shape of a flame, and a good square piece of flint and presented them to Olotl.

"What are they for?" asked the chief calpique. "To make fire with." Olotl was by no means surprised. It was, of course, usual for all gods to wield the power of kindling fire. But how? Alonso struck the stone with the metal, keeping the wick close to the edge of the stone with his thumb, and when the sparks sprang out—which caused no small wonder in Olotl's breast—he blew hard on the wick till he ignited it. Within a few days he had distributed several dozen fire-lighters and was more worshipped than ever.

This miracle prepared his mind for the third and most marvellous of the gifts which he intended to present to the community. The Otomies, like all the peoples of the New World, knew but one form of artificial light: the torch made of pine or other kinds of wood or bark. He resolved to bestow upon them the blessings of the candle. But as he warmed up to the idea, he conceived the bold plan of presenting them with the new light for the eyes of the body together with the new Light for the eyes of the spirit.

With Long Face's help, he began to collect beeswax. There were some hives in the settlement—few, for the Otomies were the least industrious of the native tribes—but there were many nests of wild bees in the vicinity. He had them all plundered for wax and put together a fair store of it. He also obtained several yards of cotton thread which he had twisted into wicks. But when it came to making the candles, he met with many technical obstacles. He tried pouring the molten wax into copper moulds, but the wax stuck to the metal and he could not get the candle out. Earthenware moulds were no better. In the end he succeeded by giving up moulds altogether and rolling the wax round the wicks on plates of warm copper. The main difficulty was that of keeping the wick straight in the axis of the candle. Practice and skill solved it.

He made twenty-four candles about two feet long and many more smaller ones. His coppersmith made candlesticks for all of them on designs provided by Alonso, and most elegant they were in their simple, straight, unadorned lines. He had also to build something else which gave him more work. Alonso had made him come to live in the teocalli and kept a close watch on him in order to preserve the secrecy of his plans. He had built a workshop for his coppersmith, with its fire, crucibles and hammers. Partly by smelting, partly by hammering and mostly by patience and ingenuity, between the two of them they made a copper Cross, three feet high and two feet across, standing on a copper pedestal and set on a wide disc of copper, wrought as a rough imitation of a radiant sun. All was now ready for the ceremony Alonso had dreamt of for months ahead.

He summoned the whole settlement for what he announced as The Feast of the New Light. His previous success with the wheel-

barrow, which everybody was now finding such a blessing, led all to harbour high expectations about the new festivity and what it might reveal to them. Despite grumbles and dark warnings from the priests of Yocipa, all the community turned up on the appointed day, as well as a strong contingent from the cold country settlement with Olayetl at their head.

The ceremony took place in a big hall in Alonso's teocalli, for that is what his residence was in the eyes of his adopted people, the temple of their new white god. When they entered the hall, they found that one end of it, that facing which they were bidden to stand or sit or squat worshipfully, was cut off from the rest by a thick curtain. The room was soon full. It was but feebly lit by slits of daylight which passed round the edges of the two curtains which closed the windows. Alonso stood in front of the curtain. He had made up his mind to speak in Otomi.

"Brothers," he said, "I call you brothers because we are all the sons of one God within Heaven. This God is the source of all Light : that which you enjoy by day and which He pours over us through a hole in the sky which we call the sun ; and that which you feel inside you when you understand things which till that moment had remained dark for you. This one God, the only one there is, gives us light so that we reflect it on each other, just as your polished stone mirrors do when you turn them to the sun. He has asked me to give you a better light than you now possess. And I am going to reveal to you His power and His light."

He lifted his hand and Long Face drew the curtain. An exclamation of wonder stifled by awe, came out of the audience. The copper Cross was ablaze with light. The room was now glowing with the reverberation of the altar, on which the candles, big and small, skilfully arranged in the form of a pyramid of light rising towards the lofty Cross, looked like as many souls burning themselves away in self-denying devotion at the foot of the Mystery.

Alonso remained silent, not merely out of respect for the emotion of the audience, but because he felt a strong emotion himself as the New Light fell on the eager, strange faces of his adoptive people. Then he spoke again. He explained the message of the Gospels in simple terms, tried to translate into that outlandish idiom and language the divine wisdom of the Sermon on the Mount, and announced to his audience that the time was at hand when the Cross would reign over the whole country from sea to sea. Then, he took two of the small candles from the altar and offered them to the chief calpixques of each of the two communities, showing them how to put them out and light them up again. He distributed all the small candles amongst the audience, leaving the twenty-four big ones burning before the Cross,

and so let them go with the candles burning in the glorious daylight outside and a new illumination in their obscure souls.

When he was left alone, he fell on his knees before the Cross.

7

There was a man in the audience who had not lost a single detail of the ceremony, on which he had concentrated his eager attention. Long Face who stood in a dark corner behind the altar, had observed how this strange person eyed everything and in particular took in the sight of the altar and studied Alonso's features with the utmost care. Long Face noticed moreover, that the stranger did not wear his hair cut in the fashion of the Otomies. This observation aroused his suspicions and egged him on to further observation, till he came to the conclusion that the stranger was a Mexican merchant and therefore almost certainly a spy. At this stage in Long Face's studies, the suspect visitor, who had been sitting on a mat during the ceremony, altered the position of his legs and Long Face noticed that his maxtlatl, supposed to be white, wore suspicious stains of red, green, yellow and other colours. "Hum," he said to himself, "this man is a painter-scribe." When the ceremony was over, he tried to trace him in the settlement. The man had vanished.

The feast of the New Light gave deep offence to the priests of Yocipa. They were priests and therefore magicians; yet they had never been able to bestow upon their people such marvellous, though simple, blessings as those light-wax-sticks which the White God had created by merely combining two such commonplace things as cotton and wax. They realised that their prestige was threatened and felt the need of some instant and striking action to restore it.

They began by pointing out to the chiefs of their two communities that since a New Light had been kindled, it should be celebrated in the usual way, just like the New Fire ceremony which was performed every fifty-two years: by sacrificing a prisoner on the stone altar devoted to Yocipa. Olotl and Olayetl were struck by the unanswerable argument resting as it did on a tradition which they, as political chiefs, were bound to respect; yet they feared the effect which such a ceremony might have on the White God. After thinking it over, the two wise statesmen agreed with the priests on a compromise: the ceremony would take place in the teocalli of the hot country settlement but not till the White God had taken up his summer quarters in the cold country settlement, and the fact would be kept secret from him.

With the coming of the hot days, Alonso moved to his teocalli in

the highlands. The priests took their opportunity without delay. They had spent many a day of thought and fasting and many a night of prayer and vigil over the dangerous schism which afflicted their church; and they had come to the conclusion that if the ceremony was satisfactory, i.e., if they succeeded in striking light from a flint-stone placed on the gory chest of the victim, and then in lighting a candle with it, this success would be a signal from Yocipa that it was safe to take the life of the White God. But it was necessary for this that the candle to be lit in Yocipa's altar should be precisely that which had burnt at the top of the pyramid of light just under the copper Cross. This detail had been conveyed to the high priest by Yocipa in person during a dream. Alonso had left the altar in charge of Long Face, feeling now able to move about without him. But Long Face, whose mind was working on the dangers which threatened Alonso from Mexico, since he had seen and observed the Mexican spy-painter-scribe, was not in the least worried about the position in the settlement and, feeling that Alonso would prefer that the altar should be visited by as many people as possible, he kept the hall open. The priests had carefully studied Alonso's candles. They made one as identical to the one they coveted as they could contrive it, and were able to interchange the top candle and its counterfeit without awaking Long Face's suspicions.

So, on the night, appointed for the ceremony, the old teocalli, dedicated to the cult of Yocipa, was crowded with people, including a deputation from the whole country headed by Olayetl in person. A victim had been prepared in the usual fashion and dressed in funeral paper. He was laid on the sacrificial stone and the high priest of the hot country (in whose territory the schism had broken out) opened his chest with a long obsidian knife and offered the panting heart to the god who, masked with a turquoise mosaic mask, grinned on the proceedings. Then the priest of the cold country struck the flint with a piece of copper. Sparks sprang out from the stone at the third stroke and ignited the wick on which he blew eagerly, till he raised a flame with which he set alight the candle stolen from Alonso's altar. A happy smile shone on the faces of all the priests. Yocipa had accepted their victim. The White God would soon be struck dead. The candle was left burning before the image of the victorious god.

Alonso had made it a custom to keep the candles on the altar burning for an hour after sunset. The day after the ceremony, Long

Face lit the candles in the usual fashion. A few minutes later he observed that the top candle was out. He lit it up again. After a while, the candle was out. Time and again he tried to light it. Every time it went out again. He sent a secret message to Alonso to the effect that the top light would not burn.

Alonso came back to the hot country, which caused some surprise and not a little concern to the priests. The fact that the top candle did not burn soon became general knowledge and everybody took it as one of the minor episodes in the war between the two gods. But what disquieted the priests was that the White God might have returned because the whole situation had been revealed to him by his own divine powers.

Alonso meanwhile studied his top candle carefully and found that it would not burn because the wick was too thin and burnt itself out before it could imbibe enough wax. As his candle wicks had all been made out of the same yarn of cotton, he came to the conclusion that the candle which would not burn was not his, a fact which a closer inspection of the wax fully confirmed. Therefore, he argued, my own candle has been stolen. Now, why the top one? The answer pointed clearly to the priests.

He lay on his hammock one night, in a secluded patio of his *teocalli*, when it seemed to him that some shape moved in the dark. He waited in silence. The hedge was certainly moving. Who could come to him from that almost inaccessible part of his domains? Presently, the night gave out its mystery and under the faint light of the stars and of a thin slice of moon, he beheld the Lake-Goddess. She was wearing a *huipil* but he recognised her at once: the poise, the way she held her head and the soft curve of her shoulders.

"Good-evening," she said timidly, as one who is not sure of a good reception.

"Good-evening," he answered, with an affectionate tone of voice. "Why have you come to see me?"

"I had to. But you must keep the secret carefully. That is why I have come this way."

"I shall keep the secret. Speak."

Icniuhyotl then explained to Alonso all that had happened in the old *teocalli* and what it meant.

"And why have you come to tell me?"

"Because you are in danger. The priests believe that *Yocipa* has now granted them your life. And they will kill you."

"How do you know?"

"I am a nun in *Yocipa's* service."

"Why do you betray your god?"

"Because I worship you!" she said simply.

Alonso remained silent. She stood in the night watching him while he meditated.

"When do you think they will kill me?" he asked at last with a true masculine disregard for unrequited feminine feelings.

"They have been studying the stars for a propitious day. It is still far off."

"How far off?"

"I am not certain. Perhaps three months. Certainly two."

There was a long silence again.

"You cannot go back the way you came."

"I must."

"Then, I will take you down."

It was a steep ravine, at the bottom of which a brook leapt down to the river through broken, sharp rocks. Icnihyotl had to crawl down the ravine and cross the brook. Alonso took her hand, which trembled slightly, and both went down carefully, choosing every spot on which to set foot so as not to slip and fall down the precipitous cliff. Then they reached the brook. Alonso felt a sudden impulse, seized her in his arms, took her across the water and the rocks like a child, kissed her on the lips, left her on the safe side and ran back across the brook—towards his own safety.

9

Alonso did not sleep again till dawn. He was not very much disturbed about his life, for he was too brave to dwell on personal danger for long; moreover he had felt himself in the hand of God ever since he had so miraculously escaped from his first captors. What caused him deep distress was a double current of self-distrust which he perceived in the depths of his being: one which he traced back to the sweet lips of Icnihyotl which he had just tasted; the other which he connected with the revelation of the secret ceremony she had imparted to him.

He had remained in bewilderment after he had kissed her. Why had he done it? *Who* had done it? He was puzzled to find that there was someone in him who, without his leave, would kiss that girl for him with his own lips. Was it then that we were a crowd of people rolled into one under one skin, and that now, this now, that person in us took the upper hand? An appalling thought which kept him moving uneasily in his hammock while on a lower and deeper plane the stirring sensations left in his hands and mouth by the girl's youthful body were quickening his senses and awakening him to an aspect of life new to him. So far, he had remained aloof and distant from the body of

that native race whose soul and spirit he had dreamt of conquering. Now, through that sweet young girl, he had come into touch, literally into touch with the native body and he wondered if that experience would not weaken him in his spiritual quest.

Thus the current of self-distrust which he could trace back to her lips joined the other current which came from the revelation of the secret ceremony. This people whom he had thought of enlightening had betrayed him by sacrificing a human victim to their old blood-thirsty god with the very instrument of the New Light he had handed to them. How could he hope to bring about so portentous a change, alone, unaided? His thoughts gradually veered round to a vision of an Old World polity which might grow some day on the New World soil if an enlightened conqueror succeeded in establishing the authority of a Christian State over those heathen populations. He mused bitterly over the Island settlers. He remembered the wretched ideas which prevailed in Santo Domingo, despite the well-meaning efforts of monks, about the natives and the way to treat them. What was happening in Santa Isabel? How was Antonio managing it? Suddenly an anguishing desire to return to his own kith and kin seized hold of his soul. For the first time he felt the horror of the situation, severed, perhaps for ever, from Christendom. No. Something in his heart told him that if he could not return to Christendom, Christendom would come to him. He dwelt on this thought for the rest of that long, sleepless night. At dawn he had made up his mind that whatever the loss and the risk, he would settle on a spot on the coast where he would have a chance of coming in touch with Christian ships which might be passing. This decision relieved him from his anguish and he fell asleep.

He found himself beholding a strange and dramatic scene. A young woman was asleep on a low couch laid on the floor in the usual native way, but in more luxurious surroundings than he had yet seen anywhere in the New World. Alonso had a feeling that her features were not altogether new to him and after some effort to recollect where he had seen her, he remembered her: she was the strange virgin who had appeared to him in his dream at the foot of the altar in the Moor's Hill monastery. He beheld her with peculiar delight and was deeply enjoying the quiet harmony of the sleeping beauty when all of a sudden a tiger leapt on to the foot of the bed. The maid woke up, horror-stricken; but the tiger, instead of advancing further stood paralysed, his eyes glued above the maid's head where the wall suddenly became alive and a royal eagle, claws out, wings spread, threatened to fall on the beast. At the sight of the furious bird, the tiger turned tail and fled.

Alonso woke up. "I wonder," he mused, "whether in real life a tiger would run away from an eagle."

IO

The death of Nezawal Pilli left Moteczuma as the senior monarch in Anahuac, and therefore removed the last restraining influence on his overbearing and tyrannical character. Matters were made worse by the fact that Nezawal Pilli had left no instructions as to his succession, which led to a civil war between his eldest son Cacama (Xuchitl's half-brother) and Vanilla-Face, a younger and the most spirited brother of Xuchitl. Moteczuma liked Cacama, who was pious, brave, conservative and ready to fall in with any suggestions the emperor put forward. One of these was that Cacama should remove Nezawal Pilli's treasure to Tenochtitlán, Moteczuma's own capital city, ostensibly to save it from Vanilla-Face's onslaughts, Cacama followed this advice, thus delivering himself entirely into the hands of Moteczuma. Vanilla-Face revolted and raised an army which was finally defeated by Moteczuma's generals. To celebrate this victory, Moteczuma had one thousand prisoners sacrificed to the gods on the festivity known as *Tlacaxipehualiztli*, which need not be described beyond saying that the word means *skinning-alive*.

There was another suggestion of Moteczuma which Cacama accepted without difficulty. Xuchitl was to return to the Emperor's personal service. Despite Xuchitl's vehement opposition, the will of Moteczuma had to be obeyed. All she obtained from her subservient brother and her tyrannical uncle and brother-in-law was that Ixcawatzin would continue to be the head of her personal bodyguard and that Moteczuma should give up his plan to have her housed in the quarters of his women. Xuchitl asked and obtained a special apartment of her own in the palace.

She returned to Mexico with a heavy heart and was not long in realising that her worst fears were justified. Moteczuma's eyes were for her like two open windows through which she could see the fire of sensuous desire burning in that dark soul. That fire, however, was not the only passion which made them sombre. Having from the first conquered the right of looking him in the face, she was able, as was no one else in the kingdom, to observe the fears which now and then made Moteczuma's spirit stampede altogether, leaving him like a helpless trembling leaf. These fears rested partly on facts and information, partly on prophecies and suggestions, relating to the coming of Quetzalcoatl's men, the white, bearded men who were expected from the east. She soon realised that the unfortunate emperor sought a refuge for his fears in the company of women, and though he had several legitimate wives and hundreds of concubines, he was always

eagerly seeking to satisfy his craving for new life by submitting fresh victims to his sensuous appetite.

One day, after dinner, which she had served along with three other girls of high rank, Moteczuma bade her remain alone with him. She was in a wretched mood, for she had had to serve him a dish of human meat, a fare which the emperor ate but rarely and always from a victim of a religious sacrifice. Xuchitl, born and bred within this custom, had never practised it, for her father had quietly and passively opposed it all his life ; but she naturally looked upon it as a matter of course. What made her wretched was that she knew from experience that whenever Moteczuma ate human flesh, he became violently sensuous. It was a hot summer afternoon. Moteczuma was smoking an acayatl of tobacco and liquidamber which filled the room with an inebriating aroma. The doors had been shut. The windows were open.

"Xuchitl," said the emperor, pulling at his cigar, "you choose to forget that you once committed a crime which is punishable by death." She was taken by surprise. "When, sir?" He smiled, showing his white, dazzling teeth, and looked at her with the eyes of the owner. "When you looked me in the face, as you are doing now, though you know full well it is forbidden." She cast her eyes on the floor. "I shall not do it again." He pulled at his cigar in silence for some time. He was sitting back on his low chair, having in front of him the red leather cushion which acted as a table for his meals. On the cushion shone a wide, round, heavy, gold ash-tray. "That is not what I meant. I want you to look at me." She raised her eyes and looked at him. She was wearing a purple embroidered huipil and had no paint on, no jewels. She was, of course, barefoot. "Only, you know the price of that privilege, don't you?" She stared right into his eyes. "No, sir." Moteczuma smiled again a malicious, pointed smile. "If you will look into my eyes, I must have your body."

She felt a blow right in her stomach and remained silent. "Not later than to-night." She stood motionless, wondering what to say, what to do. "Sir, that cannot be." "Why?" asked the emperor. "Because I am already promised to someone else." Moteczuma was much put out by this explanation which he did not expect. "Who is that?" And Xuchitl, as if she were speaking of the most matter-of-fact betrothal answered: "One of the new men whom our lord Quetzalcoatl is sending from the east."

Moteczuma let his acayatl fall on the floor. Xuchitl picked it up and laid it on the gold ash-tray. The news was astounding ; it raised his fears to a feverish pitch just when he was trying to forget them. How could this girl be promised to one of the men of Quetzalcoatl ? Then, it was true they were coming ! He was tidying up his mind, getting it ready to submit Xuchitl to a regular interrogatory when the

gong outside his door rang three times. It was Petalcalcatl's signal. His chief steward never disturbed him unless the business was grave.

"Sir, a courier just arrived from the Otomi country brings news and pictures which claim your attention."

Xuchitl seized her opportunity and vanished from the room.

II

The courier stole sideways into the Emperor's room, clad in a poor, outworn, cotton wrap, to show his respect for the monarch. He brought two pictures on cotton sheets which he laid on the red cushion without a word, then waited. One of these two pictures represented a man with a pink face, long golden hair and beard, and blue eyes. The other showed a yellow, glowing Cross with a sun no less glowing behind it and many lights burning on sticks in front of it, while below, rows and rows of Otomies were squatting in the most worshipful attitude.

Moteczuma put a few questions to the courier. Was there only one such man? Did he conquer any following amongst the Otomies? The courier answered he had only seen one man of that description and that he thought his hold upon the Otomies was very strong. Moteczuma asked no questions about the candles. He took it as a matter of course that the pink and golden man was a magician and could make any stick produce a flame. He attended to practical things only and made the courier give him all kinds of particulars on the actual site of the Otomi settlement, its accessibility and the troops that would be needed to storm it. Then he called back Petalcalcatl. "Put this man in jail till we ascertain that his reports are true. If they turn out to be correct, you will let him out. If not, you will hand him over to the priests of Witchilopochtli. They are rather short of victims."

Moteczuma was left alone with his fears. The pink and golden man must be secured. True he was a magician, but there were magicians in Mexico who could be pitted against him. The pictures . . . the portrait tallied with that which Nezawal Pilli had once brought him. The Cross and the lights were, no doubt, magic signs. He struck his gong. "Petalcalcatl, bring me the magicians of the chief teocalli." The chief steward left the room in silence. Moteczuma lit another acayetl. "I wonder," he thought, "whether this man is the one Xuchitl is expecting! I must hurry up and forestall him. That confounded Izcawatzin is in the way. He now has taken to sleeping across her door." He mused for a while, then grinned. "It would be a master stroke! Two birds with one stone!"

The magicians filed into the room. They were five, all in priestly

attire and well perforated with sacrificial wounds. "Look at those pictures and tell me what you think about them," ordered the emperor with a wave of the hand. They pored over the two canvases. No one dared speak. At last, the eldest said, "This man is one of Quetzalcoatl's servants." The emperor was scornful. "I know that! I need no magicians to tell me that!" Feeling the subject to be dangerous, the magicians turned to the other picture and had a long view at the Cross shining on the sun. "That figure," said one of them, "is a *Tonacacuahuitl* which means the stick of fertility. The bar across is the female and the bar down is the male, and the sun behind stands for the life they spread in all directions."

Moteczuma was angry. "You dog, have I asked you to soil my air with your breath for you to come and recite me the first lessons you give in the Calmecac?" The magician withdrew to the background trembling from head to foot. The others remained silent. "Who is this man? Where is this happening?" asked the emperor in a rage, pointing at the two pictures. The magicians were too terrified to speak. The emperor hit his gong savagely. "Petalcalcatl, take these five stinking dogs out of my presence. Put ropes on their necks. Have them dragged across the causeway to Iztapalapa and cast into the lagoon. Give their houses and property to the widows of the war against Vanilla-Face."

12

He tried to sleep, but he was too angry, too upset. His eyes glanced back and back again at the gold ash-tray and away from it and back to it again. It was a gorgeous piece of the goldsmith's craft (one of the most advanced in the Aztec culture), in the shape of a circle, with a central cup for the ashes and a wide, deep rim on which four precious stones were disposed at right angles: a chalchihuitl, a turquoise, a ruby and an opal. Moteczuma's eyes seemed to be now attracted, now repelled by this opal. At last he put his finger on it and pulled it sideways. A hollow space was revealed in the deep rim of the ash-tray. He dipped his fingers into it, extracted a powder which he mixed with the tobacco in his acayetl, closed back the opal locket and went on smoking.

A few minutes later his acayetl had slipped from his hands and he had fallen into a deep slumber. A golden wheel turned at vertiginous speed. It came close to him, caught him and made him turn with it ever quicker and quicker, till he became the whole wheel himself and, while remaining a wheel, he stood in the void in a vertical position, with his feet up and his head down, while Xuchitl lay horizontally,

making up a cross with him, and below thousands of human beings shouted yellow cries which came out of their bodies through their heads while the yellow wheel, which was he, roared an immense golden vociferous howl shot through with red yells, purple wails, scarlet cataracts of laughter, streams of blue tobacco smell, thunderous peals of black fury and swift zigzags of livid terror which melted into waves of the green smell of *peyotl*. The eagle which lay hidden under the smell suddenly burst forth and filled the whole wheel with a whirlwind of riotous feathers, some hot, others wet, others rasping like sand or soft like silk, all turning round with the wheel of golden noises, while the eagle claws tore the deerskin of the drum into which the Cross had apparently transformed itself and made it burst into a new powerful torrent of red, yellow and blue roars which rumbled away ever wider and wider till they drowned all the noisy feathers in the lagoon. The lagoon was now vertical, hanging from heaven like a screen of water and he could see the sky between the water on the right and the bridge arches on the left; till suddenly, the hole was blocked by a huge blue ball of tobacco smell which fell precipitately and in mid-air met with a green wheel of *peyotl* smell which was rushing upwards with an equal speed. The shock was terrific and the whole water sheet of the lagoon was burst open by the wheels of noise which spread into space filling it with colours he had never seen before and by the riot made by the rays of the sun, beating with all its furious light on a *teponaztli* made of seven colours which suddenly became a gigantic figure of *Xuchitl* coming to him hand in hand with a gigantic pink and golden man. "How is it," asked the emperor, "that your hair is golden and yet makes no noise?" And as the giant was going to speak, *Moteczuma* woke up.

13

The man who had oozed out of his oneness into the ever flowing fluids of time and space was at some pains before he recovered enough self-mastery to assume again his official mastery as emperor over his subjects. He looked around, trying to understand the cold world in which colours, shapes, noises and aromas stuck to their own separate orbits. Not till he observed that the red leather cushion remained faithful to itself for instant after instant, bearing the weight of the golden ash-tray with poise and equanimity, did *Moteczuma* gradually recover his self-assurance and material bearings. His mental bearings were more difficult to recapture, for he had to leap backwards over that riotous dream which still stirred in his depths. Yes. He remembered at last the magicians and further back the courier with his

pictures and further back Xuchitl. Where were the pictures? They had rolled down to his feet. He picked them up and glanced at them, now at the one, now at the other. It was indispensable to clear up the matter by securing the pink and golden man. Those Otomies were savages who could be easily cowed into submission by a resolute commander. His choice was made. He would send Ixcawatzin. It would be his first command, but he had an excellent reputation both as a soldier and as a priest and moreover . . . he would not be in the way next time the emperor tried to pass Xuchitl's doorstep.

He summoned Ixcawatzin straightaway. He gave him as his instructions to bring the white man dead or alive. He was to have as many men as he wished, but, in order to ensure against surprises and spies, he was to leave not later than midnight that same day.

14

The first thing Ixcawatzin did was to call on Xuchitl. She was in conversation with Citlali. They had been exchanging grave and pessimistic views on Moteczuma's intentions based on Xuchitl's own conversations with the emperor. Xuchitl, however, had not revealed to Citlali the bold excuse she had given him for not yielding to his desires. She was shy about it, not because it was fancy but because it was fact. For Xuchitl it was a fact that she was betrothed to the white, golden-haired man she had seen in her dream. But she was shy to own it.

When Ixcawatzin came with the news of his appointment as commander of the army which was sent to capture the white man, the consternation of the two women was complete. All were thinking the same, though no one dared mention it: Macuilmalinatzin! Moteczuma, thought the two women, was sending Ixcawatzin away with a betrayal party instructed to put him out of the way. "No," he said, "I know what you are thinking. But you are mistaken. He is in earnest this time. He is determined to have that man dead or alive."

Xuchitl shivered and grew pale. She felt as if that white man was her man. Ixcawatzin noticed it but kept silent. "When are you leaving?" asked Xuchitl. "To-night. Before midnight. You should leave for Tetzcuco at the same time." Xuchitl shook her head. "No. Cacama would send me back within a few moments. I will stay. I will face the danger. I feel that I shall win."

Ixcawatzin left them to put his men together and prepare for the march. There were always enough ready for any expedition of that

kind. He took the artist-courier as his guide, thus delivering him from his jail. As he left the town, at the head of his men, towards Iztapalapa, he saw a proud looking figure standing under the arch of the last gate, in the darkest corner available, watching the men pass. He feigned not to recognise the curious stranger, but knew only too well who he was : Moteczuma had come out to make sure that his orders were obeyed.

15

When the last man had passed by him, Moteczuma returned home. He was restless and feverish. He needed an escape from his anxieties. He knew he could only find it in women. But women, he felt, were apt to be monotonous once one had become used to them. This Xuchitl was a little pest. The time had come to impose his will. What could she mean by saying that she was betrothed to one of Quetzalcoatl's men? A mere impudent excuse. He knew she had not met any of them. Unless . . . A thought made him wonder . . . What if she had inherited her father's magical powers? Nezawal Pilli could at will take the shape of a lion, a tiger, an eagle . . . That was well known. Ever so many people had met persons who had seen it. And he was sure to have kept this power now that he had migrated to the land of ghosts. . . .

Moteczuma had arrived in his palace and entered it by a back door in the grounds. He went straight to his private apartments. He was worried but not precisely desirous of an adventure with Xuchitl or with any other woman on earth. He was just worried. If he could only . . . That would distract him from his worries. He pressed sideways the chalchiwitl on the rim of his golden ash-tray. The pot which he thus uncovered contained a powder made of the slough of a particular serpent which had the virtue of exciting sexual powers to an unbelievable degree. He took a pinch of the powder dry on his tongue and sucked it. He went to the window and looked at the stars. He returned to his seat and picked up the two pictures and looked at them, first with a keen attention then without even seeing them. Suddenly he rolled them up into a tight roll which he squeezed in his hand furiously and left the room swiftly but stealthily, like a thirsty tiger.

As he moved towards Xuchitl's bedroom, he saw a figure sleeping on the doorstep. "What!" he thought, "the dog has come back!" But he soon realised that the sleeper was a woman. Citlali in fact, whom he did not know. He passed over her. Citlali slept blissfully. He entered the ante-room, lifted the curtain and beheld the object of his mad desires. He had in his hand the long, stiff baton he had.

made with the two cotton pictures, an irrelevant object which he had brought along without realising it, for no reason whatsoever. He was shaking with desire. His eyes drank in the young body, helpless before him. Above her head a loose tapestry hung over the wall. The light of a torch fell on it and brought out the bold design and gorgeous colours of a royal eagle which was embroidered in feather-work on a blue and white background.

A sudden spurt of his desire overpowered him and he leapt forward to fall on her. The window-curtain was blown in by a gust of wind which struck the tapestry sideways, swelled it like a sail and made the eagle spring outwards from the wall. Terrified, Moteczuma saw Nezawal Pilli come towards him in the eagle's body with his wings spread wide and his claws sharp ready to close upon his head and neck. Xuchitl woke up to see the emperor flee headlong, muttering incantations, into the shadows of the room and beyond. The hanging over her bed fell back into quiescence as soon as the gust of wind had been absorbed by the dormant air of the palace. Xuchitl saw a rill of cotton on her bed. She unrolled it and beheld the figure of the white and gold man. She smiled and, ignorant of the capital part her father had played in her rescue, she thanked the white stranger mentally for her tyrant's defeat.

16

Alonso explained to Long Face that he had made up his mind to go and live by the sea, alone. Long Face declared himself ready to accompany him and Alonso was glad to accept his offer. When Long Face realised what was in Alonso's mind, he felt happy. "I know the very spot. I discovered it when I ran away from my Tlaxcatec master, the one who bought me from Tozan. It is a field high up on a tableland above the sea. It is most difficult to find and nearly inaccessible." The conditions of this place seemed so desirable that Alonso decided to settle there. He had become obsessed by the idea of seeing a Christian ship and the dream of communicating with her crew.

He began to prepare his emigration most carefully. The spot was, so Long Face reckoned, one and a half days away. He began by sending Long-Face to reconnoitre the spot, with an inconspicuous stock of food, mostly maize and some axis. Within a few days Long Face came back much elated. The place was as good as he remembered it to be. It was deserted and bore no trace of having ever been visited by either man or beast, save birds and insects. There was only one access to it. It was difficult to find and even more difficult to climb. On Alonso's in-

structions, Long Face had left the food-stores in one of the many natural caverns in the spot.

Every now and then Alonso sent Long Face with another load, now of food, now of copper, wax, candles, ropes, cotton and hequequen wraps, shoes and leather. The Otomies were light-hearted, unobservant, indolent people, who failed to notice what was going on—all but one of them: the Lake-Goddess. Her eyes had seen and her heart had guessed. She realised that it was inevitable and was reconciled to a loss which made her heart ache. But she stayed in the background and said nothing. Within a few weeks all was ready for the departure.

That morning a message came into Olotl's hands from his brother Olayetl, head of the cold-country settlement, to the effect that a body of Mexican troops had been sighted and that, after a parley, they had been admitted peaceably because their chief, one Ixcawatzin, had assured them that he came as a friend. The message added that the true aim of this Mexican expedition was to seize the pink and gold god. Olotl received the news with some concern. No community ever cares to lose any of its assets, be it as divine as it may. But the high priest pricked up his ears and decided to have another look at the stars. It might well be that this Mexican expedition was the way Yocipa intended to avenge the wrong done to his worship.

Alonso was told nothing about this situation. Olotl would fain have spoken to him, but he had not dared openly to oppose the priests, who insisted on silence. Alonso, however, could not be found. The priest had sent some of his acolytes to see him with the hope of picking up some object he might be wearing at the time, say some thread from his clothes, for the required incantations. But Alonso could not be found nor Long Face either. This caused no surprise, for the pink and gold god was of course free to come and go and he used to be away for days at a time.

Alonso and Long Face had left during that night. As they were leaving the house by the garden towards the edge of the precipitous ravine, they saw a shadow moving in the dark. "Don't hide," whispered Ichniuhyotl softly. "I know everything and will say nothing. I came to say farewell." Alonso looked at her hands. "What is that?" he asked. "A knife," answered the girl, "I brought it because I wanted you to give me a lock of your hair." Alonso was moved. He took the knife, cut off a lock from his long mane and gave it to her. He felt the danger of tenderness rising within him and rushed the interview to free himself from its insidious power. "Go now," he said affectionately, "and keep silent. I will come back." She answered nothing and shook her head.

They disappeared into the dark night.

. 17

Icniuihyotl hesitated. She looked at the stars. It was early yet. She would not be missed at the convent. She had time. She knew it was unwise, dangerous perhaps. But still . . . She went into the teocalli which, till that very moment, had been Alonso's residence and temple. She entered the hall. The windows were shut. She was alone. She was in utter darkness. She felt her way to the altar, stepped on it, sat on the steps of the copper Cross, put her arms round the Cross and hugged it with all the might of her lonely heart. There she remained for long hours, half asleep, half awake, moaning, dreaming, loving, suffering, comforted and desperate and comforted again.

At dawn, the priests missed her in the convent and, at the suggestion of one of her comrades, who had used her eyes, a party went to find out whether she might be at the white god's teocalli. The acolytes brought her to the teocalli of Yocipa and delivered her to the high priest. As they were explaining the position to him, conch trumpets and wooden drums were heard from different quarters. Ixcawatzin had done things well. He had taken all the approaches to the settlement, and leaving them well-manned, was coming up the main street at the head of his troops. Olotl had decided not to resist him and the Mexican leader marched straight to the old teocalli.

"Where is the white god?" he asked. "He is gone," answered the priest. "This is all that remains of him." And he showed the lock of hair which Alonso had given Icniuihyotl.

Both Ixcawatzin and the priest put all possible questions to the girl—but in vain. She knew nothing. He had left the lock in the teocalli and she had found it there when, out of mere curiosity, she had gone to see what it was like by night. "But how did you know he would not be there?" they asked. "I did not know he would not be there," she answered. "I found out when I was there." "Is he coming back?" "Why not?" she asked. But the acolytes explained that, in their opinion, the white god would not come back, for nothing remained in his teocalli of the things he used.

The priest and Ixcawatzin looked at each other. Olotl was deeply concerned, lest Moteczuma thought the white god had escaped with Otomi connivance. Ixcawatzin said, "I must take this maid to Mexico with me. She will explain matters to the emperor." The priest disagreed. "Yocipa must have a victim out of this," he insisted. They came to a compromise. Icniuihyotl would be sacrificed to Yocipa and Ixcawatzin would have the lock of hair to show the emperor. Icniuihyotl was present while this was decided. "When is my sacrifice going

to be?" she asked. "To-morrow at sunset," answered the priest.

Custom granted her a free day before death on the stone under the turquoise mask of Yocipa. She stole away to the edge of the water and lived again that magic night she had spent close to him. She remembered every detail of it, both outer and inner, above all, her unutterable emotion when her eyes saw him lit by the moon, alone, for so he thought he was, "with his soul on his face," as she put it to herself when recollecting that unforgettable scene. She bathed and swam towards his shore and stood by him, even though he was not there, and sat where he had sat himself and fell asleep where he had fallen asleep. When she woke up, it was about midday. Her eyes wandered about lovingly, drinking in every blade of grass of that sacred spot. Something caught her eye at the foot of a tall tree. She recognised the "divine meat," or in other words, the "precious mushrooms." The popular doggerel about this inebriating and dangerous plant seized hold of her mind and ears :

Two, bitter strife.
Three, sweet abyss.
Six, bliss in life.
Ten, death in bliss.

and the rhyme went on and on, beating in her inner ear till it seemed to have become the very beat of her heart. She rose to her feet and collected ten mushrooms.

She walked home slowly in the heat of a heavy afternoon, peaceful and happy. The beat of the doggerel had died out as soon as she had collected the mushrooms. The streets were empty. Every one seemed to be asleep. She went to the new *teocalli* and penetrated straight into the hall where the Cross stood solitary in the dark. She was blinded at first. She felt with her hands the low table on which the Cross and candles stood and gradually recognised every object on it. With joy in her heart she recognised a square of copper of those the white god had made to strike sparks out of flints. As she expected, a chip of flint and some wick were also at hand. She struck fire and lit a candle. She lit all the candles. The copper Cross and Sun shone in all their splendour. She moved some of the candles aside, sat at the foot of the Cross and embraced it with the utmost tenderness. She ate the ten mushrooms. The doggerel started again in her ear :

Two, bitter strife.
Three, sweet abyss.
Six, bliss in life.
Ten, death in bliss.

Ten, death in bliss ; ten death in bliss, she repeated. She hugged the Cross tighter and tighter. Her mind became an ocean of dreams. Her head fell on her chest. Her long hair slipped over her shoulder, fell over the candles and caught fire. The whole altar became ablaze. And when the priests of Yocipa saw the fire consuming the roof of the new teocalli and, suspecting some miracle of their rival god, rushed to the place, they found the Cross and Sun rising triumphantly over a heap of ashes.

18

Xuchitl had spent a stormy night after Moteczuma's frustrated assault on her privacy. Scenes in which the violent emperor and her expected and awaited saviour fought each other through woods thick with trees, which suddenly blazed into gigantic flames surmounted by a gigantic Cross and Sun of gold, rose in her dreams. When she woke up, the sun flooded her room with a glorious golden light and Citlali came and went preparing her bath. She tried to replace herself in the surroundings of her daily life and to link up the strain of her thoughts with that of the previous day. A feeling that something deep and grave had occurred oppressed her. What was it ? Her eyes fell on the two white canvases on her bed. The whole scene came back at once, Moteczuma's eager face, his fear, his flight and her discovery of the two pictures. "See," she said, "this is the picture of the man Quetzalcoatl sends to fetch me." Citlali turned round sharply. She had a root of *atmolli* in her hand, the soap of the Mexicans. She knelt down (not out of piety, but out of curiosity, to come closer to the picture) and studied the portrait. It was an almost life-size picture of Alonso's face, an honest and fairly successful attempt, yet with a touch of caricature, due to the fact that the artist had subconsciously exaggerated the features which were unfamiliar to him—mostly the golden colour of hair and beard, which he had rendered yellow, the strange hue of the complexion, which he had painted pink, almost red, and the big blue eyes. Citlali looked and looked in utter fascination.

"And now, see," added Xuchitl, unfolding the picture of the candles and the Cross. "What are those fire-sticks ?" asked Citlali. "I don't know. The Cross is the sign of Quetzalcoatl, I am sure." Citlali was scrutinising the picture with the utmost attention, particularly one side of it, where in the margin of the composition, a much smaller figure could be seen standing. "You know," she said without the slightest excitement, quite as a matter of course, "I do believe that this man standing here is my husband." Xuchitl seized the picture. "Where ? Oh, I had not noticed it !" Citlali went on : "There is

no one anywhere with a face as long as his was. Notice how long this face is ! ”

“ Perhaps,” suggested Xuchitl, “ Quetzalcoatl has fetched him out from the country without doors nor windows for him to show the way to my friend.” And then Xuchitl related the dramatic scene of the preceding night to Citlali, who astonished and ashamed, wondered how she could have slept through it all. “ I believe,” said Citlali, “ that you should not stay in this house one hour longer.” “ So do I,” answered Xuchitl and she added, “ This time, Cacama will not force me to come back, because Moteczuma will not dare claim me again.” She was right in her conclusion, though not in her tacit premise, for she thought Moteczuma was by now afraid of the White God, while the cause of the emperor’s restraint was the fear of Nezawal Pilli’s magical powers which had been reawakened in him by the sudden vision of the eagle over Xuchitl’s head.

Xuchitl and Citlali left that morning for Tetzcuco without warning, leave nor explanations. Xuchitl put the matter crudely and squarely to her half-brother Cacama and dared him to move against her wishes. Cacama, who was as superstitious as Moteczuma, thought it better to abstain from any initiative and Xuchitl was finally able to settle down in the apartments of her childhood.

It was there that, a few weeks later, Ixcawatzin came to see her. He was on his way to Mexico, back from his expedition against Alonso. “ Well ? ” smiled Xuchitl. “ He has disappeared and no one knows where he is now.” Xuchitl smiled again. “ I never thought he would be found,” she said with the absolute assurance of faith. And Ixcawatzin, “ This is all I could get of him,” and he drew from his leather bag and gave Xuchitl a piece of holy paper. Xuchitl unfolded it and beheld the lock of hair. She could not speak. She just looked, hardly able to believe what she saw. Hair made of gold.

“ I will keep it ! ” she said at last. “ No. It belongs to the emperor,” said Ixcawatzin. “ I will keep half of it,” she retorted. He hesitated. “ Very well,” he said. “ But why have you come back to Tetzcuco ? ”

Xuchitl explained, and he, after thinking it over : “ You are wrong, Xuchitl. It was not the white man who saved you. It was your father whose ghost entered that eagle at the head of your bed.”

She cast a long glance at him. “ Perhaps,” she answered.

After he left her, to report to Moteczuma, she folded the golden hair into a fresh piece of holy paper and laid it inside her magic box, beside her own birth-lock.

Moteczuma received Ixcawatzin without enthusiasm. He did not like to be thwarted in his desires and his usual reaction when a commander returned unsuccessful was of the cruelest, for he was not content with mere death : it had to be death in agony. Yet, Ixcawatzin had a good excuse. The white man was obviously of a divine nature. He had disappeared without leaving a trace of his passage and had set fire to his teocalli. Ixcawatzin delivered into Moteczuma's hands the lock of hair, the colour of which was the final proof of the stranger's divine nature.

The emperor examined the hair carefully.* He then bethought himself of the picture which had been brought to him, and as he was going to gong for it, he fell into a dreamy meditation which Ixcawatzin beheld in respectful silence. Moteczuma was trying hard to remember what had become of the two pictures, and for a long while, without success. The path which in his memory led back to those two canvases seemed to be cut across by an obstacle he could not master. It was like a black cavern, jealously guarded by a fierce eagle. Gradually, however, the eagle quieted down and settled itself into a pattern woven in a hanging over a wall. Moteczuma was able to pass over the obstacle and find that he must have run back to his bedroom leaving the pictures on Xuchitl's couch. His eyes grew blacker than usual and he gnashed his teeth. How long was that stubborn girl going to challenge him ? Of course, he knew only too well that it was not Xuchitl who was challenging him, but Nezawal Pilli who had kept all his magic powers after his death. Moreover, there was that young warrior Ixcawatzin, a spy for Xuchitl, a watch-dog for Xuchitl, a nuisance who had a way of being always where he was not wanted. . . . His eyes fell on Ixcawatzin standing patiently and silently in front of him. He was enraged. "What are you doing here, you dog ?" he barked at him. Admirably self-controlled, Ixcawatzin answered : "Waiting for your orders upon my report." Moteczuma looked at him, then at the golden lock of hair he still held in his hand, then at him again. "Go," he said. Ixcawatzin moved to leave the room. "Listen," he ordered. "Stay in Tenochtitlán. Do not go back to Tetzcuco till further orders."

Moteczuma remained alone with his thoughts and feelings and passions, and with a lock of fair hair in the palm of his left hand. He struck his gong. Silent and soft-footed, Petalcalcatl appeared like a phantom. "The Woman-Serpent, first ; then my litter." The Woman-Serpent was a man, the highest dignitary of the Mexican empire after the emperor himself. His title merely meant that he was

supposed to be as shrewd as a woman and as wily as a serpent. He was not long in answering the emperor's call, and he entered the room after covering his magnificent attire with a humble wrap of grey, drab cotton. "Send a man you can trust to Tlaxcala, to tell the four tlatoanis of the republic that I am going to declare war on them. They must not take it to heart. Explain that I merely want to secure a few hundred victims for Witchilopochtli. We must have him on our side, now that the White danger is coming. Tell them also confidentially that, if they are in need of a particularly fine prisoner as a victim for their war-god, I can let them have Ixcawatzin. We shall see that he falls into their hands. As soon as he is caught, we shall call off the war." There was a silence. "When?" asked the Woman-Serpent. "When all is ready on both sides."

The Woman-Serpent withdrew and Petalcalcatl came to announce that the litter was ready. Moteczuma left the room, passed through the thick crowd of hangers-on which thronged his spacious ante-rooms and appeared under the middle-arch of the main quadrangle of his palace. The litter was advanced and he stepped into it. It was a magnificent masterpiece of the goldsmith's art. The four pillars, made of solid gold, were searchingly wrought in the shape of animals: one of quadrupeds; one of birds; one of fishes; one of reptiles. The awning was made of green, glistening feather-work; the floor was a sheet of silver, imitating a meadow studded with flowers. Moteczuma sat on a golden ycpalli. The four handles were of solid gold, plain, with the butts sculpted in the shape of animals' heads: an ocelotl, a deer, an eagle and a serpent. Four haughty noblemen carried them, not on their shoulders but in their hands, with their arms hanging along the body. In front of the litter three heralds marched erect in a row, each holding high a golden stick, a symbol of Moteczuma's majesty.

"To the Great Teocalli," ordered the emperor. He said it aloud, but no one moved, for no one was supposed to have heard his divine voice but Petalcalcatl. So the chief steward repeated the order and the procession moved off. As it came out into the street, passers-by stood silent and cast their eyes on the ground. A wave of deadly silence thus went with him through the orderly and clean streets of Tenochtitlán, cleaner still when he passed, for, a few yards in front of his three golden sticks, a vanguard of street-sweepers advanced, removing the tiniest bit of straw or speck of paper which might offend the imperial eye.

The emperor was received by the two high priests and a host of other minor acolytes. A path of thick cotton carpets had been prepared for him. He expressed a desire to visit the chapel of Witchilopochtli at the top of the teocalli. As usual, he was offered the back of a hefty

priest and on this sacred conveyance was conveniently borne to the top. There he met the two priests, to whom he explained that he wished to consult Witchilopochtli as to the new menace which threatened his empire. The priests exchanged a rapid glance. Again? Moteczuma did little else of late, and never with any concrete results. "I have here," said the emperor, showing the priests the lock of hair, "something which may help us." The priests were curious. "It is," explained the emperor, "a lock from one of the white gods." The three men removed the curtain, heavily laden with copper-bells, which separated them from the chapel, and found themselves at the foot of Witchilopochtli's shrine. The god towered above them, a gigantic figure covered with pearls, wearing a mask of turquoise-mosaic, with round staring eyes and a square mouth showing a double row of square white teeth. A heavy necklace of hearts of gold hung from his neck, and from the necklace long, golden shrimps of exquisite workmanship. A few golden shrimps were also to be seen hanging from the top of his black boots. Round the waist he wore a girdle of golden snakes; in his left hand an arrow made of a blackish wood, carved and decorated with silver, and in his right hand five black arrows with silver points.

A row of braziers was burning before the god. On the fire, of small wood and odorous barks, the priests threw copal incense to cover the hearts of the human victims they had sacrificed that very morning, which were burning on the embers. As the emperor entered the chapel, the sacrificial quails, tied together in a dark corner, fluttered for an instant and fell again into quiescence. The stone walls of the chapel were covered with a blackish crust of human blood.

One of the priests took a quail and handed it to the emperor; the other one handed him an obsidian knife. Moteczuma snapped off the quail's head with a sharp movement of his expert hand and after offering it to the god, threw it to one of the braziers, while he smeared the feet of the image with its blood. The priest handed him a bone bodkin. Moteczuma pierced his tongue right through. The other priest gave him a string. Moteczuma tied it to the lock of hair and then passed the string and the hair five times through the hole in his tongue. He then threw the hair into the brazier and sprinkled the feet of the image with his blood. Finally, one of the priests gave him an acayotl of tobacco with a pinch of peyotl. He inhaled the smoke and gradually crumpled down to the floor. The priests waited, standing on each side of the emperor, keeping watch on him while he gave himself over to his sacred dreams. Every now and then they pierced their arms with bone bodkins and sprinkled blood on the shrine.

Moteczuma meanwhile saw the teeth of Witchilopochtli rise towards his eyes which had become two poles stuck into the ground,

while the teeth became as many white skulls disposed in a row between the poles. Over the whole the sun rose above the clouds, and a shaft of light, the colour and shape of the golden lock of hair, fell slanting upon the scene. It was not a shaft of light, but a spear of gold which pierced his heart as he lay on the ground, and from his heart, Xuchitl rose, threw her arms round the spear, which had become a man with a fresh, whitish complexion and fair hair, and vanished with him in the sky.

The emperor woke up, rose to his feet and left the temple, pensive and downcast.

20

Alonso had the reward of his foresight when he was able to climb the steep rock steps of his natural fortress-abode, light-bodied and without baggage. Nature had done things well. As he set foot at last on the top, he was seized with admiration : the sea, a quiet, sleepy sheet of green, glistening silk with grey, blue, woollen patches here and there, spread its immensity at his feet. He leant on the rocky edge which formed a kind of natural balcony round the meadow and feasted his eyes on the sight. At last, the sea. He had always thought of it as the element that separates. He now realised that it is above all the element which unites man with man and country with country. Thanks to the sea, he could still hope to cast eyes on Spain and to see his mother who, by now, perhaps thought him dead. The thought of his mother made his heart ache. He remembered the song she used to sing, and above all that haunting refrain :

Beware of love, for it is a wide, wide sea ! . . .

His eyes swept the liquid plain, rejoicing in their new freedom. Suddenly, on the horizon, it seemed to him that something bit into the sky, as it were a tiny peak of a far-off island. Yet, did it not move ? He asked Long Face, who thought that it did move. Alonso observed the spot stubbornly, endeavouring to pierce the veil of distance till his eyes ached. It did move. It could be nothing but a sail. It seemed to move along the horizon, keeping at an even distance from land, on a north-westerly course. Alonso observed it with deep anguish. He looked around for some high pole on which to hang a signal. There was nothing . . . yes, there was a tall pine which might do. He found a white cotton wrap and climbed to the top of the tree where he tied it to the highest branch he could reach. The day was hopelessly calm, and the cotton sheet hung limp and dispirited on to the lower branches.

Time went by and the sail—yes, it was a sail—remained obstinately distant. Alonso fell on his knees and prayed with a desperate heart. That tiny sail on the horizon was his life, his house in Torremala, his mother waiting for him ; a basis for whatever action the Lord might wish him to take in the heathen land in which He had cast him ; for he must first return, yes, live again and commune with his own brothers of the Christian faith. Every now and then, he cast eyes of longing towards the horizon—grey, distant, indifferent—on which that sail gradually dwindled down to a speck, a point, an illusion, a memory, a dream.

Long Face glanced at him, while he stood with his elbows on the stone, his chin in his hands, silent and sullen before that sea which had swallowed his brief hopes. The faithful Aztec oarsman realised what was in his friend's mind. In the hope of distracting him by work, he went about quietly creating inducements for his initiative, laying their stores in order inside the caverns they had chosen as their habitation, till, gradually Alonso came out of his meditation and realised that a good deal of work had been done while he dreamt away his time. Yes. The Lord was hard on him but His hand had granted him Long Face, and that spot which was ideal for his purpose. That sail had passed by, but others would come. For the present, his duty was to work.

The cavern which he had chosen would do for their abode while they built something better for themselves. They had wood and tools and time, and so they would soon have a house. There was plenty of maize in the stores and game could be had below whenever they needed it. Alonso and Long Face settled down to a life of seclusion and watchfulness. Alonso threw his energy first into the construction of the hut, for which he followed the model he had seen in the Island of Santo Domingo, and when it was finished, he devoted his time to teaching Long Face to speak the Spanish language and to write the alphabet. As paper or blackboard he used the sandy ground of the caverns.

One day, returning from one of his foraging raids in the plain below, Long Face brought along a few rabbits he had trapped, and with them, an object which meant nothing to him but which upset Alonso deeply. It was a Spanish leather-bottle. It had contained wine. It was empty but in a perfect state, with its wooden stopper and rim complete. How could that bottle have arrived there, on that shore where Long Face had found it? Alonso thought first of Quintero. But he remembered Quintero's wine-bottle perfectly. It was bigger, of a different shape and of a better leather than this. It seemed to him moreover that this bottle had been made in the Islands—either in Santo Domingo or in Cuba. He could tell by the texture and scent

of the wood, which he could perceive through the smell of wine. The neck, usually round, had been coarsely flattened with a knife on one side and letters had been roughly cut into it which he could not quite make out. He decided to visit the spot on which it had been found.

Both went down the next day and eagerly searched for other possible traces of a Spanish landing there. Long Face suddenly shouted he had found something. "What?" "I don't know what it is." Alonso ran towards him. Long Face had a rusty helmet in his hand. This piece finally removed any doubts which might still linger in Alonso's mind. There had been a Spanish landing on that spot. It made him miserable. He had missed it. "Yet," he thought, "this shows that the spot is good, and that they will probably come again." They went on searching. They found some traces of fires bigger than any which the natives were in the habit of lighting. Alonso had an idea. "Let us climb to the top of that knoll." He said to himself that if Spaniards had landed there, they were sure to have pitched their tents on that knoll. He was rewarded by the discovery of what had obviously been the Spanish camp. He recognised the stockades. He found a round stone ball. "They had a big gun," he thought. He found a boot in a very bad condition. And at last, he found a message which signed and dated the expedition and gave a name—and what a name. It was an inscription cut into the bark of a ceiba tree with an uncouth knife: Aq. estuo. VTE ESQVEL con la ARMADA DE J. D. GRIJALVA EL X DE VI DE CXVIII. (Vicente Esquivel was here with the fleet of Juan de Grijalva on June the 10th, 1518.)

This name, Vicente Esquivel, cut into a tree at the foot of his solitary fortress, made him muse: "How small is the world!" Here, within such a small area, in such distant and unexplored lands, he and the playmate of his childhood days, had almost come to meet. "Who knows," he thought, "but that we may still play together again the game of thieves and constables in grown-up life!" He had no doubt that Esquivel had remained a thief. With the rusty helmet dangling from his hand, he returned pensively to his observation post. He felt again in touch with his mother country and ready to wait with courage and with hope for the return of the caravels.

While Alonso had been discovering and exploring the main land as a single, shipwrecked individual, Diego Velázquez, the Governor of Cuba, had tried to explore the same land with fleet after fleet well-manned and appointed. The expedition which had left the traces

Alonso had seen on the horizon had been sent by Velázquez to the rescue of Grijalva, the commander of this second fleet and had returned without having found him.

The plain under Alonso's rock had been one of the spots in which Grijalva had landed temporarily, to refill his water barrels. He had settled there for a few weeks to give some respite to his men and to his horses and to allow them to eat fresh food. There were deer in the district as well as small game. But the native tribes, after a none too friendly reception, had fallen upon them somewhat unexpectedly and Grijalva had had to re-embark his troops hurriedly, leaving behind him a mare whose re-embarkation threatened to be difficult, because she was with foal, heavy and easily frightened.

The mare did not miss the men. She looked after herself with the shrewdness of an experienced female, found comfortable quarters, discovered the best water-pools and eventually gave birth to a neat little foal as white as she herself was. But a few days after the birth, as the foal was coming near its mother to feed, its thin, unsteady legs began to tremble, its nostrils to quiver, its eyes to wonder. The mare was dead and the little creature of life had been prompted by its deeper instincts not to approach the dead body. It stood there for a while, helpless and hesitating, then hopped away.

It wandered about the valley in search of food, but there was none. It saw green leaves, bays, twigs, blades of grass and other plants, but no food, no udder to suck. The world seemed to it a strange place. "Fancy," its obscure mind cogitated, "fancy a world in which one can wander for about half a sunny stretch of time between two moons without finding a single udder. It simply has no sense." Tired out and hungry it went to sleep.

A herd of deer was rushing down from the hills towards the watery pools by the river. There was a little fellow in the vanguard, hardly a month old, which thought itself up to any running and leaping despite its mother's anxious advice and it took the biggest risks without hesitation though its eyes were not yet trained to measuring distances. Suddenly as it leapt between two crags it fell short and its body crashed on to a cruel crags below and was smashed to pieces. Its mother came upon the edge of the ravine at the bottom of which her young lay dead, went down with trembling legs, smelt and licked the body still warm and after watching it for a long time, moved away slowly with tears in her eyes.

"I knew it would happen," she was thinking ruefully. And as she felt her udders moving right and left with the slow rhythm of her dejected steps, she said to herself, "What shall I do now with all that milk?" She had lost sight of the herd. She saw something in the distance which seemed to her quite unlike anything she had seen

before. She came closer to it. It was a—what was it?—a kind of deer but quite unlike any other she knew; white and pretty, more thickset than her own kith and kin. Quite a baby. It was asleep. She lay by it, led by some forlorn maternal instinct. She lay by it and waited. Presently, the white little something woke up. It explored the vicinity with its nose. "Udders!" it thought with joy. And it sucked eagerly.

22

That helmet was the object of Alonso's preferential attention for many a day. He transformed it from a dirty, rusty, rubbish-heap wreckage into a museum piece. Why so much care for such a thing? He would not have been able to answer the question. All he knew was that the helmet became the centre and lodestar of his life. Could he guess that generations of warlike ancestors had rejoiced in his blood at the mere sight of it? And that the helmet, shining and well-oiled in the joints, drew their loving glances through his eyes and made their hands fidget in his for sword, lance and reins? One day he tried it on. It fitted him well enough, and on seeing him, Long Face gazed open-mouthed at his companion: Alonso had become the very impersonation of the god of war.

Every now and then, Long Face or Alonso went down to catch a deer. They used to trap them with skilfully contrived nets. The herds came down at top speed, leaping down the steep slopes of the opposite hill and over a rill which separated it from their own rock, then turned round towards the river pools. One day, as they watched one of the herds which they knew well, galloping down the hill, the trained eyes of Long Face detected a strange animal running with them. "There. Do you see? I have never seen such an animal before. The white deer. As white as a cotton sheet." Alonso could not believe his eyes. It was a young horse.

From that day on the two men devoted all their ingenuity to catching it. They had eaten many a deer of the herd which had adopted it, and tanned many a skin, before their efforts were at last crowned with success. Alonso, who had dreamt of nothing else since he had seen it, had already prepared everything he needed to train and ride it. He had begun by constructing a hidden access to the top of their fortress, so that the colt could be brought up, and had made reins, stirrups and a saddle of sorts, and even a bit and shoes made of copper. One day, Long Face came up with a smile of triumph. The "white deer" was trapped and secured to a tree.

Alonso went down at once. He liked the look of it exceedingly.

The colt was not yet a year old, he thought. He was not sure that it would allow itself to be taken up on the very first day and decided to devote that day to ingratiating himself with it by providing for its needs after making it feel them. He fed it and gave it water. He had a hammock brought down and slept close by. After a few days, the shy animal was tamed and Alonso was able to throw a halter round its neck and take it to the top. There was excellent food for it in the wild grass of the fields, and good water too. Alonso began to train it straight away. He was patient and had no lack of leisure.

He had made a spear and a buckler with the means at his disposal—wood, leather, copper. One day, months after the colt had been caught, he mounted it, donned his helmet and with the buckler in his left hand and the spear in his right, he trotted about the meadows of his fortress, thinking and wishing: "What a pity there are no enemies about!"

23

Days, weeks, endless months went by and Alonso scanned the sea with anxious eyes, but he saw no sails. The winter went by and the spring returned. He had devoted his time to teaching Castillian to Long Face. He taught him to speak it, and write it in block letters, both because it was simpler and because he thought wiser to reserve small letters for his own use as a special script. He trotted now and then on the upper plain of his fortress, but had never taken the horse down, owing to some prejudice which he did not quite formulate or express to himself. One day, in the spring, they saw a ship coming from the north-west. She sailed close to the shore, evidently inspecting it. He made ready to ride down and signal to the men in her. But, to his great dismay, she turned round and a brisk wind spirited her away.

The whole day went by in the usual monotonous solitude. But the next morning, as he looked along the coast towards the north-west, his eyes beheld a number of ships—about a dozen of them—anchored beyond the river, by the sands, and on the sand dunes, a crowd of busy human ants, coming and going with all kinds of loads on their backs. An expedition had landed from the Islands. He fell on his knees and thanked the Lord.

He took his buckler and spear and put on a wide round straw hat which he had made. He hung the helmet on the saddle bow and went down towards the spot. Long Face was left behind with the assurance that he would either come back or send him a written message with instructions.

It was a long way, which he rode through a thick forest first, then meandering mostly by guesswork through the firm paths across a swamp, then at last through dry, sandy dunes which rose across his way like waves. When he came to the top of the last of these dunes, he beheld a strange sight. The plain at his feet was in turmoil. A sea of warriors was fighting furiously against the Spaniards. He reckoned there were many thousands of natives but no more than four to five hundred Spaniards, with but little artillery and no horses. This last fact puzzled him greatly, until he saw further away, round the edge of the swamp, a small troop of about a dozen horse, and he realised the position in a flash. The horsemen had tried to surround the Indians and to fall on them from behind, but the swamp had forced them to make such a detour that they would surely arrive too late to the help of their hard-pressed infantry. Alonso did not hesitate one second. He seized his spear and drove his spurs into the horse's sides. The colt leapt forward and the Spaniards suddenly saw, actually saw St. James riding in the air above them on a white horse shod with golden shoes—St. James, golden-haired, blue-eyed, naked and noble and beautiful and brave with a golden aura round his head. The Indians fled in disorder and St. James galloping behind them disappeared into the sky.

The Spaniards were saved. They fell on their knees and blessed the Lord.

PART X

THIEVES AND CONSTABLES

I

THE ARMY so miraculously saved had been raised by Velázquez, the Governor of Cuba, to go to the rescue of the two preceding expeditions, of which he had no news. This at any rate had been Velázquez's original intention; but even after the two missing expeditions had returned, he persisted in sending it to the mainland in order, as he thought, to make money by bartering for gold and to find out what sort of a country it was. Events, however, turned out quite differently, because he happened to appoint an outstanding man as head of the expedition. His name was Hernán Cortés.

The genial and spirited conqueror had seen from a distance Alonso's feat and his single-handed victory over the Indians. He was

riding at the head of his small squadron of horsemen—sixteen in all, including himself—when to his utter amazement, he saw a horseman galloping on a white colt putting the natives to flight by his sole presence and dash. His companions crossed themselves and felt certain the horseman was some holy apparition—St. Michael or St. James. Cortés was a most devout man, but his sense of humour kept him off miracles. What puzzled him was the horse. The man was no mystery, for he knew there were Spaniards stranded in the land.

When he and his squadron reached the main plain after their long detour, Alonso was peacefully riding back, having abandoned his pursuit of the Indians. Cortés saw him come and halted his horse. Alonso was a picturesque figure. He was wearing some kind of white cotton shorts, held to the waist by a leather strap ; the rest of his body was bare and had been tanned by exposure to a rich red-copper hue ; he had a long, fair beard, and his golden hair covered his neck and shoulders ; on his white horse a home-made saddle from which hung the steel-helmet. His spurs were of copper and so were his stirrups, the point of his long spear and the centre and the edge of his leather buckler. He came close to the squadron, halted and stood still, smiling, leaning on his long spear. His wide, palm-straw hat made an aura round his tanned, sunburnt face.

There was a silence. Most of the horsemen behind Cortés were overawed. Cortés was cautious. Alonso spoke at last : “ I thank the Lord for your coming. I had waited for so long ! ” Cortés smiled his seductive smile. “ We also thank the Lord Who sent you to our help just at the right moment. But where did you find that horse ? ” The question was typical of the occasion : horses mattered then more than men. “ That,” answered Alonso, “ is but a part of an old story which cannot be told briefly.” The horsemen—a motley squadron, composed of men of all stations—had recognised in Alonso a Spanish nobleman. “ Sir,” said their leader, “ you would make us all happy by accepting the hospitality of our camp and telling it to us.”

They rode in to camp together. Many of the soldiers were still praying round the priest, Juan Díaz, a narrow-minded bigot who held fast to the view that the knight on the white horse was St. James in person ; the majority, however, had gone about their business on hearing Father Olmedo, the Friar, say with a smile : “ I don’t believe St. James would ever ride down all the way from Heaven to help such a band of sinners as you all are ! ” When “ St. James ” was seen riding along the main street of the huts and tents in conversation with Cortés, the priest was left alone in prayer and half the camp laughed at the other half.

“ I remember,” said Cortés. “ Of course, I remember. You were a small boy then. And there was a fool in the town, the wisest fool I

ever saw. He had been the victim of the scene in the market which led to my bringing Esquivel over. And by the way, Esquivel is here with me. You may see him to-night in the camp."

The sun was setting and in the still air the bell rang for Evensong. The horsemen dismounted. Cortés gave Alonso's horse to his own grooms. Every one went on their knees before a tall wooden Cross which had been erected on one of the dunes, and Father Olmedo led the prayers. Alonso's emotion was deep. His heart was flooded with gratitude. He had returned to the fold of his own kith and kin, to that Christendom from which, in his hours of despondency, he had believed himself severed for ever.

There, on top of the dune, the Cross stood high above men, the symbol of that world hard for the self, soft for the others, which was the only true coming together of the hard world and of the soft world every man meets with on earth and brings with him to earth as well. The language of his mother was being spoken around him and the countenance and gestures of his father were alive in many of the noblemen who had greeted him with open arms on hearing his name. He was saved. He was more than saved. He was back in the only conditions in which he would be able to serve the heathen peoples amongst whom he had landed, by imparting the Light of the Cross to them from the top of the hill of power. That evening no one in the camp prayed with more fervour than Alonso Manrique.

A stroke of the bell put an end to the ceremony. The camp began to stir again. Fires were lit to roast the venison caught in the morning rides before the Indian aggression; soldiers came and went with pails of water; others, sitting by their huts, were cleaning their weapons, preparing fresh arrows, mending their clothes. Cortés led Alonso to his tent; his pages brought out a few stools, and one chair for the general. Cortés himself had gone into his tent, from which he presently emerged and, throwing on Alonso's shoulders an orange-coloured silk and velvet gown, said, "Here, Sir Alonso Manrique, cover yourself and let us hear your story." Alonso was too respectful to refuse the gown, though he made little use of it. His skin had lost the habit of clothes and even the soft silk hurt it. He sat on a stool by Cortés' chair; the other gentlemen made a circle round him, and he began to speak. As he unfolded the tale of his adventures, bunches of soldiers drew nearer and sat on the sand listening to him, till in the end the whole camp was under the spell of his words.

In a group opposite him, behind the crowd, a swarthy, fat, cross-eyed soldier, who might be about his age, whispered to the others: "I don't believe a word he says. He is a born liar, like all Jews." "Is he a Jew?" asked someone. "His mother was, till she became a Christian to marry his rich father," answered Vicente Esquivel.

"Then," retorted the questioner, "you lied yourself when you called him a Jew. And I will stand by my words." "You need not take it so hotly," answered Esquivel.

2

When the story was over, Cortés asked Alonso to dine with him. He wished to talk matters over with this invaluable recruit. He invited no one else. They dined within the tent, for the sake of privacy. When, after the meal, the pages withdrew, Cortés put a number of questions to Alonso on the natives, their way of life, their war habits. He was delighted to hear that Alonso spoke two native languages, one of which, the Mexican or Aztec or Nautl, was by far the most important in the country. Alonso explained moreover that his Mexican friend and companion Ixtlicoyu or Long Face knew Castilian fairly well and could even write it. Cortés remained silent on hearing this fact. He seemed to be considering its importance. "I must ask you a service, Sir Don Alonso Manrique," he said at last. "You must enjoin on your native friend never to let any one know or find out that he is familiar with our language." Alonso was not able to guess what was in the general's mind. "Sir, I did not think I was doing any harm—" he began to excuse himself. Cortés smiled at his simplicity. "Harm? Who spoke of harm? You have done marvels. But we must never throw away a weapon which the Lord puts into our hands. Ask your man to hide his knowledge. It may still be more valuable to us some day if it remains unknown."

Next morning Alonso rode back to his fortress. He explained the position to Long-Face and brought him down to the camp together with all their belongings worth transporting, to begin a new life amid new people. Alonso became the indispensable companion and interpreter of Cortés. That very day, a deputation of the defeated Indians called on Cortés. Their faces were heavily painted with black and white streaks and their attire—wraps and loincloths—were miserable and dirty. As an offering, they brought hens, roast fish and maize bread. Cortés received them with a severe countenance and instructed Alonso to inform them of his displeasure, for he expected a better embassy than a score of slaves as they all seemed to be. The ambassadors took no offence, for in fact that is what they were; they had been sent by their principals on the idea of "try it first on the dog."

Impressed, no doubt, by the energy of Cortés' attitude and by the fact that, though slaves, he received their emissaries, the Indian chiefs decided to come in person to the Spanish camp to meet their one-time foe. They had little gold to offer, yet they brought what they

had : four diadems and a few golden lizards and ear-rings. They brought also rough coverings of henequen and some food. But their chief present was a living nosegay of twenty lovely girls. Cortés received the chiefs with the utmost courtesy, then with Alonso nearby to translate it all, he addressed them, explaining that he came from far-off lands to teach them a new faith ; that this new faith required that they should all live in peace ; and that, while he was grateful for the present of the girls, and accepted it, he or his friends would not be able to take them for their wives till the girls had first been taught the new faith and had embraced it.

The caciques were nonplussed and the Spaniards were displeased. If one had to wait for a native girl to become a Christian in order to sin with her, how long was one to remain an enforced saint ? Cortés held his ground, but the criticisms became louder and louder and he did not feel strong enough yet to stand up to a general movement of opposition in an army as democratic as his. He compromised on a swift conversion after four days' training entrusted to Alonso, who had read theology and was ordained, if only in minor orders, or so he thought. Alonso took up his new duties with earnestness, and every morning during those four days he sat on the sand with the twenty young girls explaining to them the beautiful and moving story of the life of Christ. He kept away from all complicated theology and from all matters of discipline and duty. He concentrated on love, particularly maternal love, and showed the girls the image of the Mother and Child as the goddess of the Whites.

The following Sunday was Palm Sunday. An open-air altar had been built. A gigantic wooden Cross had been erected at the foot of which the image of the Mother and Child stood smiling amongst flowers. Father Olmedo and the cleric Díaz, dressed in their gold and silk chasubles, officiated, and then a procession was organised. Every captain and soldier carried a green branch in his hand. When the procession was over, the twenty girls were christened and immediately distributed by Cortés to his chief captains.

Alonso was relieved to find that Cortés offered him none, and somewhat surprised to see that he took none himself. As for the girls, they were soon made to realise what the Spanish conquerors meant when they laid so much stress on the cult of the Mother and Child.

That evening, the pilots came to call on Cortés. They were anxious about the weather. The anchorage was not good. The north wind was

gathering strength. It was advisable to leave at dawn in search of a better port. Cortés was a man of swift decisions. At dawn his ships left in a north-westerly direction, following the coast. On Holy Thursday in the afternoon, they dropped anchor in a harbour which had already been explored by two less fortunate Spanish fleets and called by one of them San Juan de Ulúa.

Alonso had made the voyage in Cortés' own ship. The general's favourite friend, Captain Puertocarrero, was also on board. Cortés had given him the most distinguished of the twenty Indian girls, a Mexican who had been baptised as Doña Marina and was a handsome woman with a commanding personality. She was the daughter of a powerful Mexican chief who had died while she was in her tender years ; and her step-father had got rid of her by pretending she had died and selling her as a slave. Doña Marina told this romantic story—which later events substantiated—to Alonso Manrique, and explained to him that she wanted to learn Spanish. There and then Alonso began to teach her, and Doña Marina, who was most intelligent, made rapid progress. "I wonder why she wants to learn it and how she manages to learn it so quickly," said Alonso one day to Long Face. And Long Face quietly answered, "She is in love with the general and wants to be useful to him."

Cortés settled down in San Juan. He landed his horses and guns and made his soldiers build themselves a camp of wooden huts. Faithful to the Spanish proverb, "duty before devotion," he made his troops work throughout Good Friday, so that by Saturday the camp was ready to receive friend or foe with equal serenity. That very day the Governor, who ruled over that land on behalf of Moteczuma, sent a message to the effect that he would come in person the following day.

4

Moteczuma had received a complete pictogram of the events in Tabasco, including the unexpected gallop of St. James, which was explained to him in equally esoteric terms by his local artist-reporter. When he saw the picture of the horseman, he remembered the one he had seen earlier and which Xuchitl had taken away. What if the portrait was that of the man of Quetzalcoatl to whom she was engaged ? And when and how had they become engaged ? It could only be by magical means, since no man of such description had come near the valley of Mexico. No doubt one of Nezawal Pilli's tricks. That is why he had come to the rescue of his daughter, and why he was sure before his death that these new men were coming. It was imperative that

they should be kept away. If possible, they ought to be induced or forced to re-embark ; if not, they should be made to stay away on the coastal regions, leaving him in a quiet possession of the tableland.

He had one of his trusted men summoned. His name was Quintalbor. "I am sending you as my ambassador to the men of Quetzalcoatl," he said, "because, from what I see of them in my pictograms, you look the very brother of their leader. And if they are using spells at all, which is very likely, we stand a good chance that the spell may be puzzled by your likeness and work for you and not for him. You will take with you many presents of gold, silver and feather-work, and also this slave," and he showed him a fine-looking man named Cuitlapiotoc, tall and handsome, explaining, "in case they should wish to eat human flesh, as the gods often do. You will present Cuitlapiotoc as a great lord and dress him accordingly, for the gods do not like the flesh of slaves. But, should they be content with nothing less than you for their meal, be certain that I will take care of your widow and children."

5

One sunny morning the embassy reached the Spanish camp on the coast. Both Quintalbor and Cuitlapiotoc were dressed in the brilliant attire of Mexican ambassadors and followed by an imposing retinue of secretaries and carriers. Cortés received them surrounded by all his captains and by a number of his soldiers. The ambassadors bowed three times and Quintalbor began his speech, which Alonso translated. Moteczuma offered his friendship and presents but advised the stranger to re-embark and sail away. Cortés made no answer, but beckoned to the friar who stood by him. Everything was ready. The whole Spanish Army turned towards the altar for Mass to be said in the presence of the two ambassadors. Alonso explained to them that this was a religious sacrifice. "Where is the victim?" asked Quintalbor. Alonso felt that the question was not of those that can be answered in a hurry. Quintalbor thought that Alonso was embarrassed because, as they had just landed, they had not been able to secure a victim for their altars. "Here," he said, offering Cuitlapiotoc, "my master would be very pleased to let you have this distinguished lord. You may sacrifice him on your altar and eat him afterwards in the ritual fashion." Alonso's face expressed so many strong emotions that Cortés was led to ask: "What do they say?" And when he heard the explanation, crossing himself he remarked: "Let us thank the Lord Who sent us here. There is much to do in this country for Christian men."

There was no mistaking the accent of gratitude in these words, and Quintalbor perceived it through the language-barrier, though he misapplied its intention. "I am glad your chief accepts," he said to Alonso, "but he need not feel so grateful to us, for we shall give him as many victims as he likes on condition that he remains here on the coast."

"Father," said Alonso to the friar, "could I have the Host in the Monstrance?" Father Olmedo gave him a small Monstrance with the Host in it. "See," said Alonso to Quintalbor, "this round bread is our victim. It is the flesh of a lamb which was killed fifteen hundred years ago. We always keep it with us and we need no new victims because It lives for ever." Quintalbor's eyes shone at last with the light of understanding. At last, he was hearing words which had a meaning for him. That a lamb killed fifteen hundred years earlier should live for ever in a wafer of flour was for him a self-evident proposition, requiring no stronger assumption than the possession of magical powers on the part of those who had killed the lamb. He made ready to follow the sacrifice, though he personally thought that it would lack the dramatic appeal of the actual shedding of blood.

Quintalbor was a man of fastidious taste. He was, on the whole, bored by the Mass. The friar had a good voice and sang the service well, but his gestures seemed to be always the same and, so far as he could judge, nothing happened at all, though possibly the magical ceremonies which seemed to him the most ineffective were the most powerful beneath the surface. He kept touching himself and watching Cuitlipitoc closely, lest they were suddenly changed into serpents or lizards or some other wild form of animal life; but as the Mass went on, he felt relieved to find that the strangers were either unwilling or powerless to do them any harm. Suddenly, he heard a trumpet-call. The sacrifice was over.

Quintalbor asked leave to unload his presents. Cotton cloths were laid on the sand and the tlamemes deposited their loads and opened them. A wide circle of Spanish soldiers surrounded the scene. Their eyes grew wider and wider with astonishment, admiration and cupidity as they beheld the wealth of the presents Moteczuma was sending—load after load of beautifully wrought cotton-wraps, feather-work, silver and gold jewels, most of them filigree imitations of animals of all kinds, and above all two wonders: two elaborately engraved circles, as big as cartwheels, one of massive silver, representing the moon-calendar of the Aztecs and the other of massive gold, representing the sun-calendar. The Spaniards were dazzled. "Gentlemen," rang the clear voice of Cortés in the air stilled by admiration, "this Moteczuma must be a great monarch. With the help of God we shall one day see him."

6

This scene made a deep impression on Alonso's mind. It confirmed his conviction that a political conquest of the country was necessary in order to substitute the religion of Christ for that of the sanguinary gods. He knew full well how often the Christian—even the Christian priest—fell below the standards of his faith. He had not forgotten—how could he?—the Boar in the Seminary. . . . And many other things as well. But he felt that such shortcomings were human failings of Christian behaviour which did not touch the excellence of the Christian standards, while in the religion of Witchilōpochtli it was the standard itself which had to be removed as inhuman.

He began to study Cortés from this point of view. Was he to be the man of Providence? There was no doubt in Alonso's mind about one point at any rate: Cortés stood head and shoulders above every one of his companions in mental and spiritual powers. His mind could rise to high and wide issues of policy, of history, of destiny, yet never lost touch with the movements and details of everyday life. He was sagacious and shrewd. Alonso admired the mixture of good grace and firmness with which he had put his case to Moteczuma's ambassadors. "I come," he had told them, "as the envoy of the great Christian emperor, to see Moteczuma and to conclude a covenant of amity with him. I must see him in his capital and deliver my message. Nothing shall deter me from this task."

"How is your Lordship to fulfil it," Alonso asked him in the general's tent one night, "having in all just over four hundred men and sixteen horse and with so huge a country to conquer?" And Alonso heard with a deep emotion the simple answer which came straight from the big heart of his chief, "I shall not accomplish it, but God Our Lord will do it through me."

Alonso was conquered. "Then, sir," he went on, resolved to help that man of faith with all his power, "Your Lordship might begin by purifying this army of the faint-hearted who go about in its ranks." Cortés looked up. "What have you got in mind?" "All your soldiers and captains are not your friends." Cortés laughed. "I know that!" And Alonso, "Some . . . many . . . mostly the friends of the Governor of Cuba, want to return to the island, to their wives and their Indians and their sugar-mills." And Cortés, with a glance of his serene eyes, answered again: "I know that."

Alonso felt that he had a plan.

7

Cortés moved his camp to a better emplacement, a few miles to the north-west, found for him by a captain named Montejo. He had chosen this captain to command the expedition which discovered the camp because he was one of the leaders of the Velázquez faction. Cortés nursed him especially, giving him positions of honour and trust, but he had also taken the precaution of offering him Long Face as his servant or *naboria*. A few days after they had settled in their new quarters, a deputation of natives came to call on Cortés. They were Totonacs and they brought modest presents, in the usual native fashion, with a request that Cortés should help them to resist the tyranny of Moteczumá, whose calpixques took away their gold and their women. Cortés received them with his accustomed smiling grace and assured them of his help. When they were gone, he turned to his interpreter Alonso and said: "See how the Lord begins to show His hand. This land is divided against itself. We shall prevail." Alonso smiled and remained silent. "What is in your mind?" asked Cortés. "We are also divided, sir." And Cortés: "We shall be soon reunited by the grace of God."

That night, Captain Montejo was in his tent, playing cards with three other captains. The table was a drum. They were sitting on the ground. An oil-lamp, emitting more smoke than light and more smell than smoke, cast murky gleams and ghostly shadows over the scene. A dark figure stood at the entrance of the tent. "In or out!" concisely ordered Montejo. "In," said the visitor, "if Your Mercy allows." Montejo looked up from his cards. "Well, Esquivel, what is the matter?" Esquivel was busy studying the four faces around the drum. "Things are happening," he answered at last, satisfied that his four listeners were of the right sort, "which Your Mercies should be watching with more attention than those cards. A number of gentlemen, with Puertocarrero at their head—does this Indian know Castillian?" Montejo looked round. "No. He is too dumb for that," he answered. "Hm. I am told he is the man who once lived with Manrique. How do you know he has not picked up some Castillian?" "Come on!" said Montejo impatiently, "I even wonder whether he can speak in his own tongue!" Esquivel shook his head. "The Lord preserve us from spies. . . . As I was saying, these gentlemen are going from tent to tent, canvassing to have Cortés elected as Captain General so that his authority no longer depends on Velázquez the Governor, and he remains free to do what he likes. . . . and to hang whom he pleases! . . ."

The four players remained silent, with their cards in their hands.

Montejo, whose hand was excellent, stuck to it and felt like adjourning all cares to a later hour. Velázquez de León, a debonnaire giant, with a long blond beard spread fanwise over his ample chest, had a miserable hand. He let it fall on the drum and exclaimed, "He is the devil incarnate, that Cortés!" "Don't get excited, though," said Montejo, holding his cards up in perfect order, with the quiet wisdom of a man whom Fate has favoured. "What can we do in the middle of the night?" he asked. Esquivel suggested some counter-canvassing. "Everybody is asleep or sleepy at this time of night," objected Montejo. "Let us play on in peace. To-morrow God's light will dawn on us and we shall see what we can do."

Esquivel stood for a while, watching the game. Montejo won the hand. There was a new deal. His hand was very poor this time. "The fact is," he said reflectively, "Esquivel is right. To-morrow, it might be too late." The others looked at him. Velázquez de León, who was impulsive and executive, sprang to his feet. "Let us go round the tents of our friends and see what they say. They may be just as much awake as we are." The five men filed out into the night.

As soon as their steps had died out in the distance, Long Face stole out of the tent lifting one of the sides and let himself roll down the sand to the edge of the sea. He walked in the water, to leave no trace of his steps, till he came to the foot of a cliff on top of which stood Alonso's tent. He knew every inch of that cliff. He climbed to the top and entered the tent through the back.

Alonso was in prayer before a Crucifix. Long Face was used to this devotion. He waited patiently. Alonso had seen him. Presently, Alonso turned round and, sitting on the sand, asked, "What is it?" Long-Face told him all he had heard. "Wait a moment," said Alonso, and he disappeared into an other tent separated from his by a curtain, where the general's pages had their quarters. They were also playing cards. "Is the general asleep?" "No," answered one of the pages. "He is talking to the pilots." "I want to see him at once." One of the pages went into the next tent and soon after Cortés came out. "Will you come to my tent, sir?" Cortés followed Alonso without a word. When they were out of hearing Alonso reported the matter to Cortés. The general reflected for a moment: "Send Long Face to Puertocarrero at once . . . no, go yourself and send Long Face back lest he be found out. Go to Puertocarrero at once and tell him that our plan is to be carried out from to-morrow at eight o'clock in the morning instead of, as agreed, two days hence."

Cortés spent a good part of the night with the pilots, winning them over to his plans. They were about a dozen men of the seas, ambitious, brave, adventurous. They listened to him with some distrust at first, but were gradually won over by his charm of manner and persuasive eloquence. He started with the golden sun and silver moon they had all seen and admired. "The fools in our army would have us melt them at once and pocket the money to-day and lose it to-morrow over a drumskin with their greasy cards. But these two planets must go to His Majesty so that he sets his compass by them." The pilots were amused by this simile. "I am not merely thinking of the ten thousand pesos of gold which they contain, but of the craftsmanship, which is as good as any in Christendom. Therefore, we are on the threshold of a rich and mighty empire, which we can conquer by the grace of God, and then, every one of us shall be able to ride in a carriage with one wheel like this sun and another one like this moon. Yet the fools and the cowards want to return to Cuba. I need your help to put a stop to all that. I am going to send two ships to Spain with our tidings and the planets, but I want no more ships. Out of temptation, out of danger, as our proverb says."

The pilots looked at each other. What was in the general's mind? What could he mean when he said that he did not want any more ships? "This is what I mean." He put twelve leather purses on the table before him. "Here is an advance on your share of the gold. A miserable advance, I can assure you, though every one of these purses is heavy enough to make many a mouth water. It is at your disposal . . . on one condition: that you report to me that our ships are all worm-eaten and no longer seaworthy. I will do the rest."

The pilots sat in silence. The senior pilot, a man who had come over with Colón, glanced at his comrades, read their faces and said: "Agreed." Cortés drew his sword, showed the Cross on its hilt and said: "Swear silence and fidelity to the agreement." Every man swore. They moved to file out of the tent. "Stay," said Cortés, and they turned round. "Your purses. They are yours."

"But," objected the senior pilot, "you had better keep them till we have fulfilled our promise."

"No," answered Cortés. "Honour must always be free." And they all went out with their wealth and their pride.

9

It was seven in the morning when Montejo entered Cortés' tent. "We have but little time," said the general, "and we both have much to do. I know you have been busy the whole night. I can tell you off-hand every tent you have visited and what they told you in every one of them . . . No ! . . . Be calm and reasonable and listen to me. I am your friend . . . Yes: I know what you want to say. You are right—up to a point. We have been sent by Velázquez and we must do nothing without him. That sounds very fine. But you are a man and not a puppet, and when the wires get too long, they are bound to snap. It is a long way from here to Cuba, and Velázquez is not here to tell us what we are to do. He sent us thinking this was like his petty little islands where naked Indians spend their days and nights in the open killing each other's lice. But you have seen that sun and that moon. They are the planets of a new world which must be ours. They will leave for Spain within a week, together with many thousands of pesos of gold and jewels and feather-work ; and the two men who will land in Seville with those unheard-of treasures like a halo round their heads, are bound to reap a royal harvest from the Emperor, for no honour in the land will be too high for them—and those two men will be Puertocarrero . . . and you."

Montejo had not been able to put in a single word yet. "Ah !" he cried out at last, smiling with humour and scorn. "You want to get rid of me !" Cortés did not smile. He looked at him with straight and stern eyes. "Take it or leave it, my friend. Fortune's smiles are rare, but valuable. I offer you to be my ambassador, leaving this place with ten thousand pesos of gold in your pocket as a parting allowance and you may return next year with God knows what honours and positions of authority which the Emperor may grant you ; the alternative is that you may remain here as my captain—" "Or return to Cuba and report to my chief the Governor," cut in Montejo. "No, sir," retorted Cortés firmly. "I will see to that." Montejo felt that Cortés was sure he could make good his threat. There was a silence.

"When is it Your Lordship's plan that we should sail for Spain ?"
"In a week from to-day." "I accept," said Montejo simply.

"I expected no less of your good sense. In an hour from now the town of Veracruz will have been founded. The town's magistrates will elect you their representative to present their homage to His Majesty. You have twenty-five minutes to canvass for yourself . . . and for me."

Montejo left the tent. Cortés saw him out and remained watching him as he walked away, with a contemplative smile. "Presents break

rocks," he thought, as usual with a realistic Spanish proverb into which his thoughts fitted as to the manner born. A shaft of hot yellow light flooded the tent sideways. The day would be hot. "Hernández," he called towards the darker, inner side of his camp quarters, "is everything ready?" A youthful voice answered: "Yes, sir. Nothing remains but to write out the names of the two representatives, and I can hardly do that till they have been elected by the town chapter."

"Write them in now. It will save you a lot of time and trouble. There are so many papers . . ." Hernández came out from his den. "But, sir, I do not know them. No one——" Cortés smiled at his youthful innocence. "Show me the Deed of Election. Here: 'And whereas the Chapter freely and of their own accord, in the faith of Jesus Christ and after commending themselves to the illumination of the Holy Ghost, etc. . . . the best and most qualified, etc. finally choose . . .' There: Now, write: 'Alonso Hernández Puertocarrero and Francisco de Montejo.' Now go and copy the same names in the other papers."

His voice was drowned in the roaring of a drum beaten by a vigorous hand.

10

The camp-crier called the soldiers to a gathering on the esplanade in front of the altar, a shady and cool natural church, the pillars and vault of which were the trees and foliage of the forest. There Cortés was to found a city, a Spanish city, a living cell of the Spanish commonwealth, from which he meant to seek fresh powers, so that, thus born to life again from the spring of authority, he would become legally independent from the Governor Velázquez who had appointed him. His trusted captains filed in, looking grave and majestic in their civilian parts. Cortés asked one of them, Alvarado, to preside. He was tall, gay, vigorous, red-haired and red-bearded, with a handsome face and a clear voice. Cortés arrived the last and sat on a chair placed on one side of the gathering. The soldiers sat or stood on the sandy esplanade. Alvarado rose to his feet and read a short address prepared for him by Cortés. "Gentlemen, we are here not as soldiers, but as subjects of H.M. the King of Spain. We have to examine the situation in which, by the grace of Our Lord, we find ourselves, and to take free decisions as free men. Let us hear what our Captain-general has to say." Cortés then put his views before his democratic army of Spanish citizens. "Some say we have come just to barter for gold and scurry back home with the loot; others hold that we are to found a new kingdom for His Majesty and to open this land of heatheris to the

Light of our Lord. I have no doubt what men such as you will prefer." He waited, as if wishing to provoke some opposition from those who wanted to return to Cuba. No one spoke. Their leader, Montejo, had a weight of ten thousand pesos of gold on his tongue. "We need a base. We need a Spanish city. Let us found it. This is not quite the best spot for it, but we know one which is excellent, discovered by Captain Montejo at the other end of this bay. I propose to you that we should call our city The Rich Town of the True Cross. For under the True Cross we shall conquer and our town is bound to be rich for so is the whole of this empire. You have all seen the moon of silver and the sun of gold."

While Cortés spoke, sure of his audience which had been thoroughly canvassed during the night, his secretary Hernández went about showing papers, suggesting names, enlisting votes. In a short time, the town was founded, its chapter constituted and its magistrates elected. They were all men of Cortés. One by one, they filed past him and were sworn in by his notary. Alvarado, who till then had presided as a private individual, on a purely informal footing, had now become the mayor of the town. He was sworn in the last and Cortés, with the utmost solemnity, delivered a long stick of black wood into his hands with a silver top on which were engraved the arms of Castille—the *Vara* or Stick of authority. Leaning gravely on the stick, the mayor went back to his seat, invited the other magistrates to sit by his side and called a meeting of the chapter.

It was an "open chapter" after the fashion of the Spanish municipalities, that is a meeting in which not merely the magistrates but all the citizens of the town participated. Alvarado rose and read the most unexpected address—unexpected for all but those who were in the secret of Cortés' sagacious mind. The Mayor pointed out that The Rich Town of the True Cross had now to discharge its responsibilities, and that none was more sacred than that of examining the powers of the men in authority. He, the Mayor, had doubts as to the powers held by Hernán Cortés, namely those of Captain General and Chief Justice. It seemed to the Mayor that these powers should be surrendered to the Chapter. The audience was somewhat put out at this and wondered how Cortés would react. To the astonishment of most of them, he stood up and most respectfully declared that he was but the last of the citizens of The Rich Town of the True Cross, into whose hands he, there and then surrendered all his powers. The Mayor then officially declared that the offices of Captain-General and Chief Justice were vacant. There was a silence. A captain, Andrés de Tapia, rising from among the audience, said: "Gentlemen, these powers cannot remain vacant for more than an Ave Maria of time without danger to us all. I entreat the Chapter to have them bestowed

at once on whomsoever they think the fittest man for them." The tall, fair-haired Velázquez de León, a relative of the Governor, was blowing hard, unable to refrain his indignation. "What comedy is this, gentlemen? Are we being fooled and by whom? Let Sir Andrés de Tapia speak out. Who has he in mind?" Andrés de Tapia put his hand to the hilt of his sword and drew the blade half an inch: "I am fooling no one, and Sir Juan Velázquez de León should measure his words or he will have to measure my——" The Mayor Alvarado struck the boards of the improvised platform three heavy blows with his black stick. "Sir Andrés de Tapia, I summon you to show respect for the Chapter. And you, Sir Juan Velázquez de León, bear in mind that the chapter of The Rich Town of the True Cross will tolerate no comedies." Hernández, Cortés' young secretary, was talking to Velázquez de León, trying to calm him, promising, explaining. "Enough!" cried out a plain soldier. "Call it a town, if you will, we are an army. Is there a man here who believes he can put on the boots of Cortés? If so, let him come forward. If not, let him shut his mouth while we all elect him as Captain-General and Chief Justice. And I have no more to say, may the Lord forgive my sins."

There was a roar of approval. In a corner, Esquivel and other malcontents were trying to raise objections. Alvarado turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to the opposition; and striking the boards again with his silver-topped stick of authority, shouted: "Long live Hernán Cortés, Captain-General and Chief Justice for Their Majesties Queen Joan and King Charles of Spain!" When the roar had subsided, Alvarado rose to his feet again: "Gentlemen, we must now decide to send our representatives to His Majesty to present the golden sun and the silver moon to him and to relate to him what we are doing here in the Lord's service and in his." And before the audience had had time to realise what he was after, he added: "I propose that we nominate as our representatives Alonso Puertocarrero and Francisco de Montejo." No one was particularly interested. Every one knew that Cortés was the master and for the rest let him decide on all such minor details. The crowd dispersed and Cortés with Alvarado, his friends and his secretaries was left to work in peace among papers and inkpots.

A scent of roast venison rose from the camp-fires.

II

Alonso had followed this manoeuvre with the utmost astonishment. As the head interpreter of the army he was privy to most of his chief's secrets. He had seen how carefully every step had been planned and

how much the inner reality differed from the outward appearance of the events which in one morning had completely altered the position of Cortés. He was particularly struck by the legalistic turn of mind of the general, who always sought to establish his authority on the letter if not on the spirit of the law. Astuteness was not a tendency of the mind with which Alonso was familiar. He wondered what its place was in his cosmogony. Cortés seemed to him the right man for the work to do in Mexico. Alonso had not even attempted yet to convert Long Face, believing it a waste of time as long as a wholesale change in the life of the country had not provided the necessary surroundings for individual conversions to thrive and flourish ; and his experiments in conversion during his sojourn with the Otomies had convinced him that nothing could be done in that field without a preliminary political conquest. Cortés, it seemed to him, was the man for such a conquest. But Alonso was struck by the fact that the chosen man served God with weapons which seemed to him borrowed from the Devil's arsenal, and he often tackled this problem in his mind without ever being able to solve it.

At the moment, however, his attention was drawn to a more immediate and personal problem. He had been most impressed by the news that a ship was going to sail for Spain. He had not heard from his parents for over three years and, what was worse, they had not heard from him either. It was only natural to think that Antonio after at least a year without news from him, might have written from Santa Isabel to Torremala, informing Don Rodrigo of Alonso's disappearance and that everybody thought him dead. He often thought of the grave consequences which the news of his death might have for his father and mother, who, thus deprived of their heir, would find themselves bound to accept in his stead a cousin of whom they knew but little, and that little, not very good. Had he been able to pierce the veil of distance, he would have seen that his worst fears fell short of the facts. But for the time being he was busy drafting long letters in which he summed up his adventures for the benefit of his father and mother.

He went to deliver these letters to Puertocarrero who was to take them to Spain. "Are you going to leave us?" he asked Doña Marina, Puertocarrero's mistress, as he gave her his letters. She had made quick progress in Castilian, but Alonso always spoke to her in Nahuatl. The handsome Indian woman glanced at him with genuine surprise. "Why?" she asked. "Are you not sailing with the captain for Spain?" "Ah!" the idea did not seem to have entered her mind. "No, how could I? I am useful here and no one needs me in Spain." She blushed. Alonso remembered Long Face's remark. Doña Marina was in love with Cortés. She had learned Spanish in order to be indispens-

able for him. She was busy at the time, preparing Puertocarrero's voyage to Spain, and it was obvious that she was not in the least put out by his departure—rather the reverse.

The ship sailed that afternoon, with the golden sun and the silver moon, presents from captains and soldiers for their relatives and friends, papers galore for his Majesty's lawyers and officials, letters, messages, recommendations and all kinds of prayers and vows. The whole army witnessed her departure, but few if any envied her and while her sails grew smaller on the horizon, they, on shore, turned their backs on the sea and their faces to the mysterious land which was luring them to high endeavour.

12

That night Alonso called on Cortés. As he lifted the curtain, Doña Marina came out of the general's room into the ante-chamber. "What—?" he was going to ask; but, with the utmost simplicity she volunteered an explanation which might have been embarrassing but which her very sincerity made merely matter of fact: "I have been asked by the general to come and live in his tent." There was a silence. Alonso was learning his lessons from life. He remained silent, ruminating on it all. "Was there anything . . . ?" she asked. "Ah," Alonso had forgotten. "I should like to see him at once."

Cortés came out of his private tent. He was wearing his orange-coloured gown, the same he had offered Alonso to cover his savage body with on the day of Alonso's return to Christendom. "Sir, I have had a report from Long-Face, who has overheard conversations between Escudero and others, including the priest. They are conspiring to sail away in two hours for Cuba. They have planned to steal a ship." Alonso knew Esquivel was one of the conspirators, but he did not mention his name. At that moment, Esquivel stole into the room. Alonso was dumbfounded and quickly put his hand on the hilt of a dagger he had at his waist. Esquivel had not seen him. He had his eyes on Cortés. "What is it?" asked the general. "Sir, grave news. But for Your Lordship alone." He glanced round the tent and saw Alonso. The two men had so far avoided each other instinctively. Cortés said: "Speak. These two are safe friends." Doña Marina was present. Esquivel then gave Cortés a version of the conspiracy which differed in nothing from that he had just heard from Alonso. "And why do you tell me that tale?" he asked Esquivel. "Because I am sorry . . . I . . . I was mixed up with some of them at first." Cortés's upper lip showed his contempt. "You may go. Remain in your tent till further notice." Esquivel withdrew.

Next morning the Crier announced that the Chief Justice and Captain-General, in the name of the King and Queen of Spain, had sentenced two men to death—and their bodies were seen hanging from a gallows erected on top of a sand-dune on the edge of the camp. Esquivel was breakfasting on a roast hen with the men of his company. "I am sorry for them," he said, "but after all, an army cannot afford to carry traitors in its ranks." "I wonder how the general got wind of it," asked another man. "I suspect," put in Esquivel, "he must have known through his interpreter. He is a converted Jew. Once a Jew, always a Jew," and he took a hearty bite out of his leg of chicken.

13

Alonso knew that Cortés had made up his mind to advance boldly inland. He thought it necessary first to acquit his conscience with regard to Quintero, his comrade, who, if not rescued by him, might be lost for ever to Christendom. When appraised of the situation, Cortés granted him every facility. The spot was not very far. It was in Totonac territory and, with the help of Long-Face who knew the region, Alonso was able to reach that shore which he could not forget, where the sea had violently thrown him on to the dry earth of a new land with the man he had now set out to rescue. They arrived in Ocutli's settlement towards sunset. Alonso had taken along with him an escort of Totonac warriors. He was wondering how to present his case to the local chief, when Taitla recognised him. She was sitting at the door of her hut or cottage, made of reeds and palm-leaves; two small children were with her. She sprang to her feet, and, in Castilian, said: "Señor!" Alonso was astonished. "I am your companion's wife. He taught me to speak god-language. That is why I can speak with you now." "Where is he?" asked Alonso, who had by then recognised the features of the girl. "Ah! These I see are your children. But where is he?" And she very simply: "In the teocalli." She moved to lead him there. A number of natives of all ages and stations joined them, so that when they arrived at the foot of the steps of the sacred mound, a crowd was following them. They went up in silence. Taitla lifted the curtain loaded with bells. On the altar, of black stone, Quintero's body, so admirably embalmed that he looked alive, stood in all the regalia of a war-god, with a fearful, black beard, bushy eyebrows, a fixed, terrifying stare in his glassy eyes and an avenging arm lifted in the air holding a handful of arrows. At his feet, Alonso observed obvious traces of human sacrifices.

He glanced at Taitla, who was burning incense before the god.

She turned to him and said : " For as long as he was with us, we won all our battles. But one morning he drank teometl and he spoke long words which I did not understand although they were in god-language, and his ghost left us. So, here is his body for his ghost to have a place to come back to when he wishes."

Alonso returned to the camp, more convinced than ever that the land could only be saved by a political conquest.

14

Cortés was sitting in front of his tent, facing the sea, surrounded by a group of captains and soldiers. The sun was setting. The camp was quieter than usual, for he had sent Alvarado away with half his army, on a foraging raid. On the path which wound its way from the harbour towards the top of the dune where he and his friends sat, a group of men was slowly climbing, silent and, as they seemed, down-cast. They were the pilots of the fleet. They reached the top, wiped their perspiring eyebrows, hot not only with the weather and the exertion but with mental stress as well, and glanced at their old leader who was to speak for them.

" Good-evening, sir. We have come to report bad news." Every captain and soldier present looked up. " We have been overhauling our ships and have found them so worm-eaten that we believe not one of them is by now to be trusted out at sea." Cortés looked grave and concerned. He put his hand to his beard and glanced at the pilots in silence. " Are you sure ? " he asked at last. " Consider that the fact is so serious and its consequences would be so grave that we must be absolutely certain of it before we act." The pilots shook their heads. Who could doubt it ? Had they not bored holes in all the hulls ? Their old leader, shaking his hoary head, with his red woollen bonnet in his hand, answered : " We are sure of what we are reporting to Your Lordship. And it is precisely because we know it is so serious that we have come all together."

Cortés kept silent. He knew that if one lets silence dig a hollow deep enough, there is sure to be a rash man to fall into it. One such rash fellow amongst his captains volunteered : " Well ! What of it ? We don't need the ships to go to Mexico. Let them sink ! " Cortés smiled : " You would not let them sink with all their stores on board and the iron gear and the sails and compasses, would you ? " he asked as one who stands for conservative measures. Another rash fellow, a soldier this time, suggested a compromise : " We might empty them and dismantle them and land all that might be useful, and let them

sink." Cortés was getting his plan gradually put to him by his men. He gave another gentle push. "But, think of it! All that wood, planks, beams, masts! . . . Would you let that go to the bottom of the sea?" "Why should we?" argued the soldier, proud to show the way to his simple-minded general. "All we need do is to run the ships aground after we have emptied and dismantled them."

The popular muse had brought forth the plan he had made her conceive. He looked no less grave and earnest than before and glanced at the pilots, who stood in a row facing him, secretly admiring his astute game. "What do you think?" he asked.

The old pilot shook his hoary head again: "There is no other course that we can see, sir." Cortés cast a glance round his audience, which had gradually increased as the soldiers about the camp saw the scene from the distance and drew near, attracted by the scent of fresh events. "Gentlemen," he said, "it grieves me to part from the ships, but if the Lord has decreed it so, as our friends the mariners tell us, I am willing to follow the advice they have just tendered me. I can see one advantage in it: we shall gain the help of at least one hundred seamen for our land adventures."

There were two parties in the army: that of the poor soldiers, who loved Cortés and were longing to get rich at the expense of Moteczuma; and that of the rich soldiers, who wanted to return to Cuba with the booty they had already secured. The first liked the idea of scuttling the ships because it thwarted the plan of those who wished to give up the enterprise altogether. Cortés, whose ear perceived the most delicate shades of opinion, noticed the concern with which his momentous decision had been received. He dismissed the pilots with a gesture which meant: "Go and scuttle the ships right now"—for they were already empty and dismantled—and he addressed his soldiers in his quiet, familiar, friendly manner which, without assuming any superiority over them, placed him at once above them as their natural leader. Instead of evading the difficulty, he tackled it boldly and squarely: "The ships will be run aground as you have suggested to me. I expected you to take that decision. I know your mettle. I know you are of those men who grow bigger and go further forward the stronger the dangers and the obstacles. The ships had become useless to us, and had to be run aground in any case. In this setback, let us see the hand of the Lord, Who wants us to devote our lives to the conquest we are to achieve in His holy service. There is no going back now. All we shall be or do will be ours. When we have conquered, there will be no one behind us entitled to share in our honour or in our profit. Both profit and honour will be ours and only ours. Henceforth, we shall have no other help than our hearts and the mercy of God."

On the following day, they started on their march to Mexico. Their first stage was Cempoal, a town in Totonac territory, prosperous and gay. The cacique, a very fat man, received them with nosegays of beautiful roses. The town was full of gardens and the Spaniards were so much enchanted with it that they called it Seville. The Fat Cacique was a sly man. He had a long-standing quarrel with his neighbours of Cingapacingo, higher uphill on the way to Tlaxcala and Mexico, and he thought he would ingratiate himself with the newcomers and use their power against his foe. The new men were terrific. Their noisy tubes killed at a distance, and the big, hornless deer on which they rode were like moving fortresses from which they could beat any warrior. He began by housing the captains in the best houses and offering them women. Cortés accepted the women, giving the pretty ones to his favourite officers, while with as good a grace as he could muster, he took for himself the ugliest of the bunch because she was the niece of the Fat Cacique. For some obscure reason which the Fat Cacique could not fathom, though both Alonso and Doña Marina explained it to him laboriously, neither Cortés nor his captains would let the girls come to live with them, but on the contrary, much to the disappointment of all concerned, forced them to remain in their parents' houses till some ceremonies had been performed, in particular, the pouring of water over their heads. The Fat Cacique, however, was ready to consent to any amount of water being poured over his niece's or any one else's head provided he could enlist the services of the white men, and of the guns and horses, against his neighbour up the hill, and he thought he was making good progress in this direction when suddenly, everything went awry.

Cortés had gone to visit the teocalli. Amid so many flowers and so many smiles, the teocalli stood as a hideous monument of blood-thirsty worship, crowned by the monstrous figures of the native gods. The Fat Cacique, shaking like a big jelly in his litter, and the ill-smelling, black-maned priests cast glances of doubt and concern at the foreign captain who, at the head of a group of his companions, was looking at the gods with fiery eyes, growing harder, while the veins of his temples swelled and reddened visibly. He turned to the Fat Cacique and said: "This must cease. I shall not be your friend if this goes on. I want no more sacrifices." Alonso translated it into Nauatl. Long Face, who knew Totonac, put it to the local chiefs, but the Fat Cacique knew enough Nauatl to do without his services and began to argue with Alonso. He would never consent to let down his gods. He would call for his soldiers. "Gentlemen," said Cortés to his

companions, "remember what I told you when we ran our ships aground. We have no other help but the mercy of God. We can achieve nothing worth doing if we do not stand by God's honour. Down with these false gods which are an insult to Him." Alonso felt a wave of divine madness rush through his veins. Yes. That was it. Heaven must be taken by violence. He stepped forward followed by a score of soldiers, ran up the steep steps of the sacred mound and threw down the two hideous and bloodstained statues, which tumbled down breaking into smaller and smaller pieces till they lay in a formless heap on the ground of the temple yard. The Fat Cacique and his priests had hidden their faces in their hands.

16

The army left for Cingapacingo the next day. It had orders to march always in strict formation, under its captains, with its drums and banners, as if they were going into battle at any moment. In Alvarado's company, Esquivel marched between Pedro Gallego and Juan de Herrera. He was grumbling against all and sundry, as was his wont, and his two companions heard him without much interest.

"This is the most mad-cap expedition I have ever seen." And Gallego put in: "You don't look as if you had seen many, anyhow." Esquivel feigned not to have heard and went on: "Either we are friends with the natives or we are not. Are we strong enough to conquer them? I ask. Four hundred men and sixteen horse. They are thousands, millions. We must try to fool them into friendship so that they open their coffers and let us have their gold." "A pretty idea of friendship, I call that!" said Gallego. "Oh well, you know what I mean. But what does this mad Cortés do? He knocks their idols down! Do you think it is a good plan?"

They were entering Cingapacingo, through incredibly difficult obstacles of a strong military value, yet almost wholly natural, for the rocky path, climbing up a nearly vertical wall, could have been closed to the strongest enemy with the slightest human effort. The Spaniards, however, were received as friends although it was known that they came as the allies of the Cempoalese, whom Cortés was the more desirous to please after his access of religious fury in their teocalli.

The caciques of Cingapacingo had come out to receive their guests. They remained dumbfounded when they saw the horses. The Chief Cacique, wearing an elaborate feather ornament hanging from his hair over his back, with his lower lip loaded with a heavy green stone, bowed three times before Cortés and, in the Nautl language, explained to him that the stories told him by the Cempoalese were all pure

inventions to avenge an old score. Cortés had a deep insight into men. He felt the man was sincere and began to suspect that the Cempoalese had tried to use him as a tool for their petty politics. He feared that his men, believing they were in enemy country, might have done some harm to the well-meaning natives ; he sent Alonso down to give orders that the country was to be treated as friendly.

When Alonso arrived at the lower suburb, he found the soldiers of Alvarado's company had broken ranks and dispersed through the fields and the huts, helping themselves to hens. He could see some of them returning to the main road loaded with their spoils, while the women and children stood at their house-doors, watching them, helpless before their actions and astonished by their looks. Alonso had a trumpet-call sounded, and when the men were all within reach of his voice he announced that everything was to be returned at once to the natives. There was some grumbling, but no disobedience. Alonso returned towards Cortés. But from his horse he saw one soldier who, instead of obeying the trumpet call, had marched ahead towards the town with two live hens hanging from each hand. He overtook him and found it was Esquivel. Awkward for both of them. It would actually be the first time he addressed his one-time-playmate since their boyish days in Torremala. " You do not seem to have heard the order." " What order ? " asked Esquivel without looking at him. Alonso explained. " You are not my captain anyhow," said Esquivel, sullen and stubborn. Alvarado, the captain, was galloping towards them. He had left his company to join Cortés, had discovered the state of affairs and was returning, conscience-stricken, wondering what his men were doing. Alonso reported his difficulty with Esquivel. Alvarado's face became red with fury. Alonso was much upset at the thought that he would inevitably be the instrument of some heavy measure against Esquivel. What ill-starred chain linked his destiny to the destiny of that family ? Torremala, Toledo and now this God-forsaken place ! Everywhere, the Esquivels across his path ! As he brooded over all this, Alvarado was hurrying after the disobedient soldier and was about to slash him savagely with his sword, when Alonso swiftly interposed a spear. Alvarado's blow was so furious that the spear was broken. Mortally frightened, Esquivel fell on his knees and joined his hands in a gesture of supplication.

" What ! . . ." Alvarado could not speak, dumbfounded at the action of Alonso. " Forgive me, sir. I could not help it," explained Alonso. " But what made you do it ? " asked Alvarado. Then, without waiting for Alonso's answer, to Esquivel : " Get out of the way, you dog, or your neck will be in danger."

They rode on in silence. Alonso was relieved of his anxiety, Ever since fate had again brought together his path and that of his old playmate, he had done his best to keep away from Vicente Esquivel, not merely out of personal dislike but because of some obscure instinct which^a warned him that there was danger for him in that sombre-starred family. This incident had come to confirm his feeling, and he rode on beside Alvarado, brooding over it. He was also concerned and intrigued about the persistent recurrence—amounting almost to an obsession—of the image of that strange-looking Mother and Child whom he had seen in his dream at the Monastery. Every now and then, for no special reason, in full daylight while wide awake, he saw her in his imagination, emerging vividly from within above the surface of his thoughts ; or else, in his sleep, at night, so clearly that she woke him up with her eager appeal . . . for whether by day or by night, the strange creature, sweet and smiling, cast anxious eyes on him, eyes which seemed to say : “Hasten, hasten, for I long for you.”

When this appeal had reached its acme, the vision usually vanished, leaving him half incredulous by its strangeness, half anguished by its intensity. At times, he feared there might be a temptation in it. The Devil was known to have recourse to such despicable tricks in order to undermine the strength of the chaste ; and he had even thought of putting the whole matter before Father Olmedo. But he had so far refrained, partly through shyness, partly because the good friar was inclined to sarcasm and irony. Alonso felt so passive about it, he had so little to do with that vision, it came so completely from the outer world, that he was sure it possessed a substantial reality of its own, and that for some reason he could not fathom, a creature somewhere was appealing to him, precisely to him, for help. It was moreover clear that this woman was waiting somewhere in the country towards which he was travelling, and that every day of their march had, so far, brought him closer to her, for since they had left the coast, she had appeared to him more and more frequently and with greater intensity.

Several days after the army had left Cempoal, as they marched on the cold, wind-swept plains of the tableland, with no other defence against the wind than their armour, Alonso was riding with the rear-guard out of a village when he heard a scream. He ran in the direction whence the voice had come and saw two or three soldiers rushing out of a house, the biggest and best that could be seen. They were much excited and Alonso had some difficulty in piecing together the disconnected shreds of the story which they told him. Nor were they as clear as they might have been. Alonso gathered that, in disobedience

to instructions, they had broken into a rich house, empty like the rest of the village, just in case a visit might be worth their trouble, and they were busy loading their Indian carriers with valuable cotton-wraps and pocketing a few jewels, when some masked and painted warriors sprang on them and caught two of them alive. Alonso gave them orders to run ahead to fetch other horsemen while he galloped in the direction in which the soldiers told him the kidnappers had fled. He was still trying to find them when two more horsemen arrived to support him. They searched for hours, but in vain, and they returned to report the matter to Cortés.

The general was indignant. He called the whole army together and addressed them from his horse. He told them that the guilty men had betrayed them all for three reasons : because they had broken their discipline ; because they had behaved like thieves and not like gentlemen ; and because they had taken undue risks. He concluded that, had he been in a position to afford it, he would have hanged the two or three who had escaped ; and he had them whipped there and then.

18

Alonso was fortunately unaware of the fact that his zeal to find the kidnapped men had cost them their lives. The kidnappers were a party of Moteczuma's warriors who had instructions to procure him a few white strangers dead or alive, for purposes of information. They had dragged their two prisoners to a thicket close to the village, and when they saw from their hidden place that a white man on a white horse was after them, fearing to be given away by their prisoners, had swiftly beheaded them.

Their chief, a captain of high rank, went in person, a few days later, to present the two heads to the emperor. He had covered his resplendent cloak with a poor and worn-out wrap, but had put on the moustache of chalchiwitl and humming-bird feathers to which he was entitled. Two slaves followed him : the first carried a fair-haired and bearded head resting on sand on a golden tray ; the second, a black-haired and bearded head resting on sand on a tray of ebony.

"Lord," said the captain, and he bowed once ; he advanced three steps, bowed again and said, "My Lord" ; again he made three steps forward, bowed and said : "Great Lord." Then he stood at attention and waited.

"Speak," ordered the emperor ; then, noticing the slaves, he added : "Show, first." The captain turned to the slaves and the first of them drew close to the emperor and put the tray before him. The

captain seized the head by the hair and raised it. The dead eyelids moved up and down as if to catch a glimpse of the emperor and Moteczuma saw the blue colour of the iris. He grew pale. With a movement of his hand he signified his desire to have the tray taken away. The second slave came forward. The captain again lifted the head by the hair. It was a robust, rough, black-bearded, somewhat terrifying countenance. Moteczuma glanced at it for a long while in silence.

"Speak," he said with a sigh. The captain told his story. The strangers were in every way like men. He did not believe they were gods. He thought they were formidable warriors, but not invincible. The most dangerous thing about them was their big hornless deer and some tubes of a substance like copper but darker and rougher, which seemed to possess the magical power of killing people with nothing but noise. Moteczuma listened but with one ear. His mind was gradually falling under the spell of that first head which had made him sick at heart. That head was surely that of the man Xuchitl was expecting, or of his brother. The same colour of the hair and eyes, the same general expression. "Go," he ordered the captain. "Leave those trays."

He struck his gong. "Petalcalcatl, cover those heads with a cloth and call in the Magicians. First the Black, then the Grey."

The Black Magicians entered the hall bowing low. They were tattooed with black circles and squares, hence their name. Their leader was a youngish man whose lower lip hung down, heavily laden with a black obsidian stone. "Who is coming, when and what is he like?" asked Moteczuma. The leader of the Black Magicians bowed and, with remarkable assurance, answered: "A new race of men is coming. They will land from the clouds. They carry their heads in the pit of the stomach and have a big foot, flat and wide, which they use to protect themselves against the sun." He smiled, pleased at his insight into the future.

Moteczuma struck his gong: "Petalcalcatl, have this filthy animal removed from my presence and see that he is walled up to-day without fail."

The Grey Magicians filed into the room. They wore grey cloths, hence their name, and were not tattooed. Their leader was an old man who looked like a corrugated Chinaman. "Who is coming, when, and what is he like?" asked the Emperor. The slit eyes of the chief Grey Magician looked down at the emperor's feet, which were resting on the gold-inlaid foot-board of his ycpalli. "Sir, the men who are coming are the companions of Quetzalcoatl. They look like fish, behave like lions, ride hornless deer and cross the seas in houses which they keep afloat by hanging them from the wind with large pieces of

cotton cloth." Moteczuma was impressed. "And when are they coming?" The magician answered: "They have come already." Moteczuma was more impressed. "And when will they go away?" The magician answered: "They will never go away. The lord Quetzalcoatl has sent them for good."

Moteczuma struck his gong: "Petalcatl, give this old man a good cotton-wrap and do not let him come again near the palace."

He remained alone, with his fears and his thoughts. The White Danger was approaching. The man who was to rescue Xuchitl was at hand. The two ideas melted into one. His crown and his power threatened, the loss of the young woman on whom he had set his desires, the only woman who had dared resist him, were but one and the same thing. In his depths, the impulse that made him hug his kingship and that which made him hug Xuchitl, sprang from one and the same instinct. Life was ebbing out and he clung to life. Whatever happened, he must have Xuchitl. He made up his mind to call Petalcatl there and then and to give orders that Xuchitl should be brought back from Tetzcuco.

To his utter amazement, Petalcatl entered the room, unasked. He was pale. "Sir, the lake is in turmoil. Huge waves are rising towards the sky from its very centre. There is no wind."

Moteczuma grew pale. He cast a terrified glance at the white cloth which covered the two heads of the men of Quetzalcoatl, god of the wind. Could it be that Quetzalcoatl was wroth and was showing him what a god in his anger could do? He rose to his feet and, followed by his chief steward, went out on to his private terrace.

The lake looked as if it were on a fire and had been brought to the boil—which indeed was very much the case. Moteczuma and the whole city had seen such ebullitions before, but never such a formidable one. Huge bubbles rose to its surface and spouts of steam and water spouted out of it here and there at frequent intervals. The frail canoes caught in its anger rose in the air, were dashed to pieces and left to float at the mercy of smaller, yet still formidable waves, unless they crashed against the hard edges of the causeways. The day was sultry, the air heavy, the wind dead. Moteczuma was overwhelmed. "Bring the heads!" he whispered with a husky voice. Petalcatl brought the golden tray and gave it to the emperor. Down below, the water rose and fell and broke into violent sprays over the terrace walls. The emperor threw the golden-haired head into the water. Petalcatl gave the emperor the ebony tray and the black-haired head followed the first. The lake was not to be so easily appeased and opened yawning, liquid jaws of unsatisfied hunger. Moteczuma waited anxiously for a few minutes. "Go," he gasped. "Have all the Black Magicians beheaded and throw their heads into the lake. Towards the east!"

Moteczuma spent the whole day in a state of abject fear. Now he attributed the trouble to Quetzalcoatl, now to Nezawal Pilli, now to some obscure entity which might unite the power of both. Every now and then he went out on to the terrace to watch the lake, in the hope of detecting in its movements the trend of Quetzalcoatl's passions and whether they were still rising or had begun to ebb. Towards sunset, when he felt wellnigh exhausted, in spite of the stimulants he had drunk and smoked, he went out again to the terrace, overwhelmed by the stubborn anger of the waters. Amazed, he stood for a long while with his eyes fascinated by what he saw. The lagoon was lovelier than he had ever seen it in his life—a sheet of luminous silk, a dream of liquid life, smiling, peaceful, smooth.

When his eyes had drunk their fill of all that peace for which he had longed during the whole day, he went indoors. The braziers and torches had been lit up by his servants and his room was comfortable and happy, well-set in its accustomed colours, shapes and moods. Why had he been so much afraid? The god had passed through a fit of temper which he had succeeded in calming by offers of sacrifices. The black magicians who had insulted Quetzalcoatl had paid for their blasphemy with their heads. All was well again and Moteczuma was as powerful as ever. He struck his gong.

"How is that Tlaxcala expedition? It seems to me we have been preparing for very long," he asked Petalcalcatl.

"The Serpent-Woman was here this morning. Ixcawatzin meant to leave this afternoon. But perhaps they may have wished to wait——" The chief steward said no more. Both knew that one does not launch forth into wars while a god is in his anger. "Tell them to leave to-night. The moon will light up their path and they will gain time. As for Xuchitl, have her brought back from Tetzcuco to-morrow evening, towards sunset. You will house her in the park, in one of the best houses available."

Well-trained as he was, the chief steward hid his surprise but with difficulty. The order amounted to inflicting on Xuchitl the public status of an imperial concubine. Petalcalcatl left the room with deep misgivings. The gods were sure to avenge this insult to their laws. He went out gloomy and concerned over his master's future. As he walked along the open gallery, he cast a last glance at the water before re-entering the palace at the other end, and stood still there finding it difficult to believe what he saw. The lake was boiling with indignation again, no doubt divine indignation. He knew full well this was bound to happen. Should he return to his master? Should he carry

out his orders? He retraced his steps. "Sir," he whispered. Moteczuma was lying back on his chair, with his eyes shut. "Sir, the lake is again boiling furiously." Moteczuma sprang to his feet, went out into the terrace and gasped at the sight. There was a long silence.

"How many prisoners are there in the wooden jails?" he asked, in a voice hoarse with fear. The moon was rising, red-coloured, and its rays lent a lurid hue to the turmoil of the angry waters. "Nearly four hundred, but I need at least half for this month's sacrifices," explained the chief steward.

"Throw the rest into the lake. Alive. Perhaps the waters need live victims. With a stone round their necks."

"How about Ixcawatzin's expedition?"

"He must leave at midnight."

"What about——?" The loyal steward dared not complete the question.

"Let her stay in her father's palace for the present." Petalcalcatl moved to go. "Bring me some bone bodkins," ordered Moteczuma. And all through the night he drew blood from his limbs and offered it to the angry lake. In the distance, he could hear the groans, the laments, the screams of the victims thrown into the water to placate the anger of the lagoon, and he began to hope again.

20

When the Serpent-Woman called, early in the morning, he found that the emperor was asleep. This was contrary to usage, for Moteczuma, who was nothing if not pious, scrupulously observed his duty to pray at dawn. The chief steward explained that the emperor had spent the night in prayer and sacrifice. "Must I wake him up?" he asked. "Yes," answered the Serpent-Woman. He was the only man in the State to whom such a question could be asked. Petalcalcatl woke his master up. Moteczuma had not gone to bed. He had fallen asleep on his ycpalli, at dawn, when the lake had begun to calm down for the second time. He was still taut with excitement, fear and expectation of evil tidings. "What is the matter?" he asked with an alarmed voice. But the Serpent-Woman had entered the room and took upon himself to answer the emperor.

"The Pale-Faces have crossed the Great Wall of Tlaxcala. They have beaten a vanguard of Otomies sent by Xicotencatl the Young just to test their powers. The Council of the Republic hesitates whether to make peace or war, but Xicotencatl the Young will attack them in any case."

This was even worse than the anger of the lake. The Pale-Faces numbered less than five hundred men. They had stood up to the Tlaxcatecs and beaten the Otomies. They must be gods or very nearly. Moteczuma closed his eyes and meditated for a long while. The Serpent-Woman waited, silent and motionless. The emperor spoke at last: "Send an embassy with rich presents and a message telling them they are not to come to Mexico. Any pretext will do. Promise a yearly tribute as high as you like so long as they do not come. Let some ambassadors bring back their answer and others remain. Those who remain must keep me informed. They must see that the Pale-Faces remain at war with Tlaxcala, and if the Tlaxcatecs do not kill the Pale-Faces off, my ambassadors must arrange with the men of Cholula to lay an ambush so that not a single Pale-Face remains alive. There is a good ravine for that purpose on this side of Cholula. Whatever happens, the Pale-Faces must not come here. I do not want to see them."

Having given these orders, Moteczuma enjoyed the illusion of having beaten off the White Peril.

21

That night Ixcawatzin had come to take his leave of Xuchitl. For weeks he had been preparing his army, and now that all was ready, he felt it his duty to say farewell, since he might leave any day. He found Xuchitl weaving in the company of Citlali. "Yes," she said, "just to kill time." She felt like one who finds it no longer worth while beginning anything, since great things were coming. "When do you leave?"

He was so absorbed watching her that he had not heeded her question. How lovely she was! In her face, he could see her father's fine features softened by her feminine nature, yet not blurred nor in any way weakened. The window let in a fresh breeze, scented with the thousand aromas of Nezawal Pilli's famous gardens. A torch shed a gentle light on the two feminine figures bent over their looms. But what a difference! Though handsome, Citlali was heavy and thick-set, while every line and surface and volume of Xuchitl's body seemed like the trace which a caressing hand had left on matter and form and space. "When do you leave?" she repeated.

"I don't know, I am ready. Any day. For all I know, perhaps to-night." He sighed. She smiled. She disliked him less since her father's death, and was grateful for his loyalty. "What is the matter?" she asked. "With what?" He was surprised. "Well, with you! Are you not glad to be sent off to the wars? Your vocation!" He did

not answer. He looked at her. She had not raised her eyes from her loom.

"Do you remember when I used to make you read the story of Nezawal Coyotl, your grandfather?" "... and yours!" she cut in. "That is exactly what you said then," he pointed out. "Do you remember how Nezawal Coyotl got rid of Cuacauhtzin?" Xuchitl looked up, stared at him and quietly remarked: "I have seen that happen since!" Had Ixcawatzin forgotten that Xuchitl's own husband had perished in the same way? "You might see it again," he observed. There was a silence. "If I do not return, and particularly if I am caught alive, you must remember your grandfather's story," Xuchitl glanced at him again. "Have you any reasons for—?" She did not finish her sentence. "My two seconds in command are unknown to me. I don't know where they come from nor anything about their military past." He kept silence, looked at the sky, aglow with a strange, purplish light. "Have you seen the lake? Boiling like a witch's cauldron. I have looked into the position of the stars. It is not favourable to me. . . ." Then he added: "But it is to you . . . which shows that I am not indispensable to your safety, as your father thought I might be."

Xuchitl, this time, kept her face downwards. "Perhaps the danger is now past," she suggested. He shook his head. "No. It is as close to you as ever. Keep your eyes open. Give no pretext. Remain on the right side of your brother, King Cacama. And never think that 'he' is going to give you up." He spoke with urgency, as a man to whom the issue at stake mattered tremendously. But she was serene almost to the point of indifference. "Go in peace, Ixcawatzin. Nothing can happen to me. I am protected."

"By whom?" he asked. "By the Sun," she answered, thinking of the golden lock of hair she treasured. "Curious," he mused. "It is the Sun which comes to your rescue in the star-picture which I studied last night, and—?" She looked up. "And?" she asked. He hesitated. "And it is the sun also that solves my next knot for me."

A soft-footed slave stood at the door. "Xuchitl," she said, "a message has come from Tenochtitlán. Ixcawatzin is expected at the Calmecac there without fail before midnight."

"Farewell, Xuchitl," he said. "May the Sun ever shine on your path."

Ixcawatzin took the causeway which led from Tetzcuco to Tenochtitlán across the lake. The water was still rising high on both sides,

and once or twice drenched him and nearly scalded him, for it was extremely hot. He was certain that he was being sent away that very night precisely because the omens were adverse, and that the emperor had put two traitors beside him the better to undo him. When he arrived in the Calmecac, he found the vast yards of the college-monastery crowded with his soldiers. The chiefs were in the temple, where all was ready for the sacrifice. He took his seat at the head of a row of chiefs. The high-priest gave the signal, and the victim, a Tlaxcatec prisoner from the previous year's war, was brought, armed with a paper sword and buckler, and bound to a heavy, round stone, by a rope long enough to allow him a certain freedom of movement. One by one the warriors who desired it were allowed to engage in an unequal duel with him, for they fought with real weapons, a thick leather-and-reed buckler and a heavy wood-and-obsidian sword. Several of them wounded him, making him bleed till he nearly fainted on his stone. The crowd of soldiers shouted. The priests seized him and sacrificed him in the usual way. Ixcawatzin first, then his officers, then the soldiers, touched the gory stone with their swords and spears. The ceremony was over. Ixcawatzin had followed it wondering whether as a result of the campaign and of the treachery he suspected hidden beneath it, he would not find himself soon in Tlaxcala playing the same part as that unfortunate victim just slain under his eyes.

On a sign of his, the conch-trumpets tore the still air of the night and the army began its first day-march. They went out towards Chalco by way of Iztapalapa. Ixcawatzin had a plan. He called his two seconds and, by way of showing them a confidence which he did not feel, he asked them to lead the army by land through the winding road which led towards Chalco while he, with two other men for company, crossed over by the lagoon. This end of the water, nearly cut off from the rest by the isthmus of Iztapalapa, was relatively quiet. Ixcawatzin had already chosen his two companions. They took no oarsmen with them.

When they found themselves alone, in the middle of the bight, Ixcawatzin spoke. "I have selected you two because you know me well and were educated with me in the worship of the gods and in the service of the emperor," he said in a grave, slow, warning voice. "I intend to put one of you in a prominent position in each of the two battalions which form our host. I cannot give either of you the second place under the chief commanders appointed by the emperor to lead these battalions because it would reveal my true mind and thwart my purpose. Now, before I speak further, I must have your oath."

Both swore fidelity and secrecy to their schoolmate and commander. Ixcawatzin spoke on: "It has come to my knowledge that your

respective commanders mean to betray. I cannot reveal to you how I know it nor the reason for their betrayal. But I know they mean to flee and spread panic in the troops under their command." The eyes of the two warriors flashed with anger. "My orders to you are: at the first sign of faltering on the part of your chiefs, slay them and take over the command of your force. Keep always close to them in the battlefield."

Ixcawatzin and his companions met the army in Chalco, where they were all housed in the *teocalli*. Chipeniliztli or Open-wound, one of the two seconds, went out for a quiet stroll around the town, and his apparently idle steps led him to the market-place. It was empty and dark. There was a cotton store in a dark corner. The door was open. He stole in. "Tozan?" he asked, addressing an old man with slit mean eyes, who sat motionless on a bale of cotton. The old man sprang to his feet. The seventeen years gone by since he had swindled Long Face into slavery could be counted in the number of wrinkles round his eyes and round his mouth. "What is the position?" asked Open-wound. "The Tlaxcatec army, under Chichimecatecuhtli, will wait on the second pass, beyond Tezmelucan. They will first feign a retreat, to give you a chance to catch some prisoners for the gods, and for the sake of appearances. Then, they will counter-attack. It is expected that you and your companion will then run down-hill leaving Ixcawatzin in their hands. They advise you to leave at least a score of prisoners as well."

Open-wound was pleased. "Very good. Return this very night. Send my compliments to Chichimecatecuhtli. Say we agree. I reckon we shall be there in three days."

"May I have a seal as my credentials?" asked Tozan. Open-wound untied a band of black leather which he wore round his waist. A green stone hung from it, plain and unadorned on the outside, but richly engraved on the hidden side, with the insignia of Moteczuma's Secret Militia, a heart held up in a hand; the most dreaded insignia in the whole country, before which every man, no matter his status, bowed in fear and trembling. Tozan put forward a piece of wood covered with wax. Open-wound pressed his insignia on it. The two men parted.

Three days later, at dawn, the army left Tezmelucan. Ixcawatzin had taken exceptional precautions, for there were three treacherous passes on their way. At the first the vanguard saw a group of Tlaxcatec warriors on a hill, and prepared for a skirmish; but the warriors

vanished down a lateral valley. Ixcawatzin had no doubt that they were scouts for the main enemy force which he expected at the second pass. Every one tightened up his *ichcahuipilli* or cotton-war-jacket and clasped his spear or obsidian-edged sword with a firm hand. The time had come.

The second pass was an almond-shaped basin on top of a hill. As the Mexicans reached the western edge of this basin, they were suddenly deafened by the uproar of the Tlaxcatecs who, brightly beplumed, brandished their colourful banners while hurling insults at their enemies over and above the roar of the drums and the shrill trumpet-calls of their conches. The Mexican army could make as much noise as any Tlaxcatec force, and so the battle began with a furious duel of clatter and sound ; then the sling-beaters, picking up their ammunition from mother earth, began to pepper each other with stones ; finally, on a signal from Ixcawatzin, the whole army rushed downwards towards the Tlaxcatecs, who ran back on orders from their general till they had reached the eastern edge of the basin. Now it was the Tlaxcatec army which occupied the stronger position. The Mexicans were fighting uphill. Open-wound and his brother officer glanced at each other. Ixcawatzin was fighting against a group of nearly twenty men, all keen to catch him alive and careful not to wound him mortally. The two seconds sounded a retreat. Instantly, behind each of them, rose an obsidian sword ready to strike. Instantly both shouted at the young warriors who threatened them : " Heart in hand ! " Instantly, the swords fell, powerless, by the side of a disheartened man who with a frightened yet angry voice, asked : " Show proof ! " The men were running away. The Tlaxcatec army was threatening to overtake the four chiefs. Open-wound and his companion untied the black leather bands which they wore at their wrists and showed the secret insignia on the green stone. All ran backwards, past the western edge and downhill towards the river. The Tlaxcatec army did not follow them.

Ixcawatzin, with the tendon of his right foot severely cut, fell to the ground. He was conveyed to the presence of Chichimecatecuhtli, a young general of about his own age. The Tlaxcatec chief looked at him in silence, with eyes full of sincere admiration. " You will die proudly," he said to the victim. " Our war-god will never have known a finer victim."

PART XI

ALONSO AND XUCHITL

I

THE FOUR speakers or tlatoanis who ruled over the Republic of Tlaxcala sat in the communal house to transact public business. Their meeting place was a spacious hall, with bare stone walls of stately simplicity. They sat on low ycpallis, in a row, on a platform raised above the rest of the hall. There was no chairman, but it was customary for them to allow their oldest member to lead off the debates. This senior statesman was Xicotencatl the Old, a wrinkled-faced, fiery-eyed nonagenarian, father of the impetuous commander-in-chief of Tlaxcala, Xicotencatl the Young.

"I hear Chichimecatecuhtli is back with a first-class prisoner," said the old man. "Let us begin with this item. It will propitiate our gods." He was going to signal to the doorman, when Teohuayacatzin cut in: "As it is a military matter, I suggest that we invite our commander-in-chief, Xicotencatl the Young, to attend." It was agreed so to do and Xicotencatl the Young was admitted first. The young general sat on an ycpalli on the raised platform, close to the four tlatoanis. Then Chichimecatecuhtli stepped in, followed by Ixcawatzin. The victorious general explained the battle and gave an outline of his prisoner's career. Xicotencatl the Old said: "We congratulate you and thank you for your services." There was a silence while all scrutinized Ixcawatzin. Another tlatoani, Maxiscatzin asked: "You seem to have been particularly severe towards yourself in your self-sacrifices?" Ixcawatzin did not answer. Teohuayacatzin pointed out: "We should wait till he has put on some weight before offering him to the god, for otherwise the faithful will not have much to put under their teeth." Ixcawatzin looked at him with a supreme indifference. Xicotencatl the Old asked: "Agreed?" And in the general silence, concluded: "Let it be done." Ixcawatzin was taken away.

"May I raise one point." The tlatoanis turned round sharply towards Xicotencatl the Young. Was it any business of his? "Forgive me," said the rash and brave captain, "but I have heard reports that this prisoner has been taken by treachery——" Chichimecatecuhtli sprang forward. "—and that the whole battle was a put-up job." With his fists clenched, Chichimecatecuhtli barked at his rival: "You lie! I have not been defeated and you have. The Pale-Faces have

made you run away like a rabbit." Xicotencatl was on his feet. His old father shook with rage. "Stop, both of you, or I will have you swept out of the room by the council scavengers!" The two young men sat down. The four tlatoanis knew full well that the wars between the republic and the Mexican empire had been for many years purely conventional fights arranged so as to provide each other with victims for their respective gods, and that, though under Moteczuma, they had tended to become more dangerous and real, they had a way of lapsing into "conventionalism" when it suited him. This state of affairs could not be officially acknowledged, and they all felt that Xicotencatl the Young had committed a breach of the most elementary decorum in alluding to it out of sheer hatred for his rival, who wisely had been content with the formal and perfunctory thanks of the Council for a more or less prearranged victory.

There was a silence which Xicotencatl the Old allowed to last for a time so as to let passions calm down and permit his son to realise how grave his fault had been. "Let us now consider the coming of the Pale-Faces," he said at last, and turning to Chichimecatecuhtli, he added: "General, you may withdraw. You have the confidence and esteem of the Council." Chichimecatecuhtli left the hall. Xicotencatl signalled to the doorman and four Cempoalese Indians entered and sat on the mat below the platform. They took elaborate precautions to cover their bodies with their cotton wraps, and particularly to hide their navels, as as to make it clear to the Council that they came as official ambassadors.

"Speak," said Xicotencatl. The leader of the ambassadors then spoke: "Tlatoanis, we come as ambassadors from Malintzin." This was the name the natives had coined for Cortés. "As credentials we bring you this thing which the whites wear on their heads," and the senior ambassador presented to the Council a magnificent felt hat, purple-coloured, wide-brimmed and literally covered all over with arabesques of silk ribbons. The hat was passed round and much admired. All longed to try it on but no one dared lest it carried with it some secret spell. One or two were even inclined not to touch it on that account. "We also bring these magic papers," and as he spoke the senior ambassador delivered into the hands of Xicotencatl the Old two letters of Cortés addressed "To the Lords of Tlaxcala," in choice Castilian, with many good wishes and offers of eternal friendship. "These papers have a magic power which we have seen work wonders amongst the Whites, for we assure your lordships in all earnestness that the Pale Gods communicate their thoughts to each other without having to paint them, by means of those designs which you see there in black." No one but Xicotencatl who was over ninety and as good as dead, dared touch the magic papers. The ambassador

went on : " Malintzin wants you to understand that he does not come as an enemy, but as a friend. He has told you so before, but you would not believe him and you sent your general against him. He beat your general and will always beat him. So, he says, consider it."

Xicotencatl the Old asked : " Does he come to stay ? Does he want food or slaves ? " The ambassador answered : " He comes to pass on to Tenochitlán, for he must deliver a message from his emperor to Moteczuma. He wants no food but that which he will need on his way. He wants no slaves."

All were silent. They had let their heads fall on their knees and were thinking hard, out of courtesy to the ambassadors. Then Xicotencatl said : " You may now go. We will discuss the matter. We shall let you have an answer as soon as possible." The ambassadors left with dignified calm. " What is your opinion ? " asked Xicotencatl. Maxiscatzin spoke first : " These men are either gods or favourites of the gods. We must not oppose them. We must ask them to come and live with us, give them our own daughters and so beget a race of demi-gods who will conquer the Mexicans and rule over them." Xicotencatl the Young cut in : " They are not gods. They are mere men. Good fighters, perhaps. But no better than ours."

" Why then," asked Maxiscatzin, " did they beat you ? " And the impetuous young warrior retorted : " Me ? No one has beaten me. Man for man, I fear no one. But they attacked us riding tall, hornless deer, where they were out of reach ; and they shot a deadly noise out of roaring tubes made of some kind of black copper."

His father asked him dryly : " What do you suggest ? "

" That we fight by night, for then they cannot ride their deer nor aim with their roaring tubes."

The tlatoanis considered this proposal in silence. Tliheuxolotzin said : " Fighting by night is dishonourable. No soldier will ever do it." The young general took up the challenge : " It cannot be dishonourable since I propose it. It is mere tradition."

" Breaking a tradition is bad enough," observed Maxiscatzin.

" Granted," conceded Xicotencatl the Young. " But something must be done out of military necessity and military necessity is paramount. How to do it is not my business."

His father then said : " The only man who can change traditions is the priest. Let us tell the priests that they must find out a reason why we must fight the Pale-Faces by night." But Maxiscatzin was not convinced. " That may come later. We first have to decide whether we shall fight or accept the peace which is being offered to us."

Xicotencatl the Young was furious. He sprang to his feet. " True men ask no such questions ! " he exclaimed with passion and contempt. Maxiscatzin, a man of about forty-five years of age, robust and agile,

was on him before the rash young warrior could stand back on the defensive, and with a violent thrust sent the commander-in-chief of the Tlaxcatec armies down from the Council's platform on to the common floor below. The other three tlatoanis rushed to separate them. The Council was unanimous in condemning the general, and Xicotencatl the Old ordered him to withdraw. His dried-up face and denuded skull shook with indignation and as soon as his son had left the hall, he said : " I must express my regrets for my son's behaviour." Maxiscatzin was generous : " A young warrior may be excused for mistakes due to rashness. Let us now return to our business." Teohuayacatzin then suggested a compromise : " Let us grant our general another chance. The priests will find a reason for fighting by night ; and if he fails, we will receive the Pale-Faces as friends."

The Council agreed, though Maxiscatzin did not grant his vote till he had obtained a promise that the army should be commanded jointly by Xicotencatl the Young and Chichimecatecutli. Teohuayacatzin raised another point : " The letters and the hat should be offered to the war-god, for, who knows ? if any one of us were to put on that hat, it might change his thoughts." Struck by the argument the Council agreed at once. The ambassadors were retained under various pretexts and the priests announced the next day that, since the Pale-Faces were the children of the Sun, they could only be beaten by night. This reasoning was so forcible that it carried conviction.

2

" You seem downcast to-day," said Alonso to Long Face. They were in their hut in a camp built on a hill which dominated the way to Tlaxcala. " What is the matter ? "

" Memories," answered Long Face. " It was in Tlaxcala that I began my life as a slave. My first master, Tozan, lived there." He was silent for a while. " Perhaps he lives there still . . . and may see me . . . You see . . . I ran away . . ." Alonso smiled. He was beginning to realise the position. " But you told me he swindled you into it." " Yes. But the law is the law, and if he goes to the court, I will be beaten to death by the executioner."

At this moment Long Face heard Tozan's voice ask, " Do you want two first-rate hens ? " He shook like a leaf and thought it was a ghost. A man was peeping into the hut through the door-opening, which in fact had no door. Long Face sprang to his feet and Tozan repeated : " Do you want two first-rate hens ? " It was fortunate for the ex-slave

that he was struck dumb. Alonso went to the door and sent the intruding merchant away. Long Face was still trembling.

"It was he!" he whispered.

"Who?"

"My master. Tozan." He remained silent for a while. Alonso asked: "Do you think he was in search of you?" He was not seeking information. He was challenging Long Face. He had a pretty clear notion that a merchant such as Tozan who went about the Spanish camp by night offering hens, did so on an errand of more import than that of re-discovering a slave run away many years earlier. "Didn't you say that he combined spying with trade?" Long Face bowed in agreement. "Then, the matter is clear."

"Do you want a heavy duck?" This was another voice. Alonso sent him away and made up his mind to warn Cortés about it. Xicotencatl the Young was evidently overrunning the camp with spies. "Don't stay here," he instructed Long Face. "Paint yourself like a Tlaxcatec so that Tozan does not recognise you and take your ears and eyes for a stroll around the huts."

He himself went out. There were shadows moving about here and there in twos and threes which moved off, dispersed or grew silent as he passed. He ducked behind a bush as he saw two natives coming out of a hut. "No. The northern way is impregnable," said one of them, a warrior of an auxiliary contingent which came ostensibly as an ally of the Spaniards. "These hens are not good enough for me, but the southern approach is quite easy, only it makes it easier also for his deer. I will show you the way." They vanished into the night.

Alonso continued his tour of inspection. There was a light and a clamour of voices coming out of one of the bigger huts. He dropped in. A score of soldiers were discussing. "It is madness," said a red-faced, black-bearded man, with a greasy velvet cap, "to insist in going forward when we are hardly four hundred men and they are at least one hundred thousand. And then, I ask you, what do we gain by it? Gold? He pockets it all. Women?" There was a turmoil. "Ah, that is it." "Women, eh?" "The boobs take all the captains! One never sees a pretty girl." Some laughed, some swore. "How about the pretty interpreter?" asked a voice with a poisonous intention. Alonso recognised Esquivel's voice, though he could not see him. In his dark corner, unseen, he blushed with anger, while some laughter acknowledged the joke. "I had caught four roses in blossom in our raid on Tlepan a week ago. Then came the order to present all the women to headquarters, so that the king's fifth could be taken off. The pest take the fifth! Did I ever see my girls again? God knows where they are!" "I saw one in Captain Lugo's tent!" "And I another one at the Treasurer's, he was testing her for gold!" There was a

roar of laughter. "You may laugh. It is not funny. This march is lunacy. We get the broken bones and . . . he gets the gold and the name!" "And the girls," added Esquivel.

3

Alonso left the hilarious and rebellious assembly and called on the general. Cortés was ill with dysentery. By his bedside Doña Marina was serving him a hot drink of medicinal herbs which some trusted native herbalist had recommended. Alonso gave his chief a report on what he had seen and heard. "I am not surprised," said Cortés, "I will settle those spies to-morrow. As for my men, they will soon be busy enough. Possibly to-night. I also have my spies, as you know." He rose from bed and asked for his page. "Is the horse ready?" "Yes, sir." "Have all the horses been harnessed with bells as I instructed?" "Yes, sir," answered the page. "Get ready, Alonso. Take your horse down to the first bend on the road. We will put as many false ideas as we can into the heads of those spies. I know they have decided to attack us by night."

Long Face did not return to the hut till dawn. Alonso was asleep. After an hour or so spent with the other horsemen by the road, he had retired, leaving only the usual sentinels. Long-Face waited for him to wake up, with true Indian patience. He was anxious about what he had seen and heard. Alonso trusted his judgment, for Long-Face was cool and well used to sizing up a situation. "Sir," he said, "there is treason about. All these merchants in the camp are spies. And while the Cempoalese are loyal to us, the other contingent we brought from Iztamaxtitlan will betray. We must strike to-day. To-morrow will be too late."

Cortés had received a similar report from the Cempoalese leader, Teuch. He had all the "merchants" arrested instantly and brought before his tent. His men and his native allies, the true and the false, made up a square of eager faces round the downcast culprits. He stood on the higher ground on which his tent was built, between Doña Marina and Alonso, his two "tongues."

"I know you, false merchants. You are treacherous spies. You deserve death. But you shall live. Yet you must lose that by which man can do harm or good. I shall take your hands from you, but leave your tongues so that you can tell your countrymen how traitors fare in my camp."

When the fifty spies left the camp for Tlaxcala with their handleless, bleeding wrists, Alonso felt dejected and downcast. He loved a fight but he hated punishment. He entered his tent in a miserable state of

mind which Long Face noticed at once : " You are quite right, sir," he said to him, " that was no punishment to give spies. With us, we tie them to a tree and we cut their bodies bit by bit so that every town and village can have some of it. And even so, it is impossible to stop people from spying."

4

On the following night Xicotencatl the Young attacked the camp. His rout was complete. He came back to headquarters more than ever determined to avenge his defeats and decided on a final battle by day, on the plain. But at this point Maxiscatzin stepped in and reminded the four tlatoanis of their promise that the command of the army should be shared between Xicotencatl and Chichimecatecuhtli. The battle took place the following day. No one but the stout-hearted Cortés would have dared face forty thousand Tlaxcatecs barring the way to his four hundred and eighty Spaniards and about five thousand native auxiliaries, half of which were potential traitors. The Tlaxcatec army was as bright and picturesque as a museum piece. Every battalion had its distinctive colour and the chiefs were brightly dressed and adorned with gorgeous feather-crests while over the field of colour, the wind, torn by conch-trumpets and beaten by wooden drums, waved their bright banners—the white heron of Xicotencatl, the green bird on a rock, the wolf with arrows in its claws and the green-feathered parasol of the other chiefs. The battle was fierce and long because the Tlaxcatecs re-formed their squadrons as soon as the fire of the Spaniards or a charge of the dozen horsemen available made a breach in their ranks. But, after a protracted fight, when all the horses were already wounded and the Spaniards were beginning to wonder whether they would come out alive from the *mélée*, it became apparent to them that the Tlaxcatec army was weakening. The feud between its two generals had been revived in face of the enemy's resistance. Chichimecatecuhtli held Xicotencatl's tactics to be useless in view of the new weapons of the Spaniards. He sulked and stood aside with his men. Xicotencatl then, to save his army, ordered a retreat. The Spanish horsemen pursued them, but half-heartedly. They were exhausted and their horses could hardly stand on their legs.

Alonso had not been allowed to take part in this battle. He had received orders to stay in attendance beside the ambassadors of Moteczuma, who had arrived the day before to present Cortés with the usual gifts of gold and jewels and to renew their requests not to proceed on to Tenochtitlán, Moteczuma's capital. The astute Spanish commander had thought it useful that Moteczuma's trusted observers

should witness a battle which his staunch faith made him sure to win. As soon as the battle was over he sent another embassy to Tlaxcala asking the Tlaxcatecs to be reasonable and to come to terms. The presence of Moteczuma's ambassadors in the Spanish camp made the Tlaxcatecs more amenable and they opened negotiations which were ultimately successful. Xicotencatl the Young came in person to see Cortés.

Tlaxcala awaited the arrival of the Spaniards with the utmost impatience. Their victory over the powerful army of Xicotencatl had earned them a reputation for almost divine might, and the city, always in fear of Moteczuma's tyrannous exaction, was anxious to secure the alliance of the new men—an alliance not merely in the political and military fields, but in actual life: for it was obvious to the Tlaxcatecs that, whether purely human or partly divine, the Whites carried in their veins a blood to covet. Cortés who had fought so hard to be allowed to enter Tlaxcala, now made his new friends wait and long for him and, under various pretexts, delayed his entrance into the capital where everything was ready to receive him. Meanwhile, he sent Alonso with Long Face to prepare the great event.

5

Long Face knew the town well. He had spent his first year as a slave in it. Cortés ordered Alonso to go there on foot, as he wanted his horses to remain always as mysterious as possible. Alonso was the object of general curiosity and, wherever he went, he was followed by a long crowd of gaping admirers. He himself was not a little surprised at what he saw, for Tlaxcala was a big town, not very wealthy, but well-built and admirably administered. His first visit was to the Communal House, where the tlatoanis used to sit in Council. He presented himself to Xicotencatl the Old and his colleagues, whom he astounded by his mastery of the Nauatl language, and the four tlatoanis took him to the teocalli.

"Everything is ready," said Maxiscatzin, head of the pro-Spanish faction in the Council, "to receive Malintzin. In anticipation of his coming, and to honour your own arrival, we shall celebrate a religious service. Here is the chief victim."

On the right-hand side, close to the wall of the yard, above which rose the one hundred steps of the temple, a row of wooden cages were disposed, gaudily painted in all kinds of bright colours. In every one of them, sitting or lying half asleep in a dispirited dejection could be seen the prospective victims for the coming days; in only one, that which Maxiscatzin had designated with a turn of the hand, the victim.

was standing on his feet. He was a young man about Alonso's age, vigorous and muscular, with hard eyes and a determined mouth. He looked at Alonso with a keen intensity and an unfathomable depth in his black eyes, in a way that made Alonso feel no one had ever looked at him before. "What is your name?" he asked. And the victim answered "Ixcawatzin."

Long Face, who stood behind Alonso, gave a start. In Spanish he whispered in Alonso's ear: "Ask him whether he comes from Tenochtitlán or from Tetzcuco." Alonso, used to trusting Long Face's judgment in such matters, put the question to the prisoner. "From Tetzcuco," answered Ixcawatzin. Long Face looked at him, trying to reckon his age, comparing ages and years in his slow mind.

"Sir," said Alonso to Maxiscatzin, "my general gave me two strict orders. There shall be no human sacrifices whatsoever, while he resides in your midst; and the prospective victims in your teocalli's cages must be delivered to him. These two conditions are an indispensable part of the bargain."

Maxiscatzin was taken aback. How difficult to please were those Whites! He would now have to countermand the religious ceremony, to order new meals for all the noblemen and priests who were entitled to eat the victim's body and to prepare living quarters for all these victims who had to be freed—thirty of them. However, it was worth it, particularly if the White men consented not to depart from Tlaxcala without leaving as many girls as possible fecundated with their precious seed.

6

At last the longed-for day dawned on Tlaxcala and the town gave itself over to the joy of receiving the men of Quetzalcoatl. Roses, roses, roses. Heads, arms, eyes. Shouts of "here they come." Groups rushing through short-cuts and by-streets. Waves of human beings beating too and fro. A surge of the human sea rising above the town over the edge of the terraces, bending like top-heavy waves over the high parapets, over the river of colour which is at last entering the town. One hears the rhythmic, repeated tread of the horses' hooves on the cobbled streets and presently, after tedious files of Cempoalese have marched past, a green silk banner with the letters F.Y. in gold, held high, heralds the arrival of the first horseman, Gonzalo de Sandoval, the youthful captain of the Spanish Army. All eyes are on his hornless deer, so tall, so elegant, despite a bandaged hind-leg; then, on the horseman himself, with his extraordinary beard and his majestic mien. A wave of murmurs precedes the appearance of Cortés

himself, riding at the head of ten horsemen. All eyes are on him. He smiles. His horse is adorned with wreaths of roses. By his side, on the right, of course on foot, the four tlatoanis in their green, red, white and yellow plumes ; on his left the four ambassadors of Motécuma, no less beplumed than the tlatoanis, on whom the crowd cast glances of fear and mistrust. Then the drums ; not the clattering, deafening noise of the wooden drums to which the Tlaxcatec crowd is used ; but a soft, more muffled rolling of skin-drums which the Spanish drummers beat proudly, measuring and ruling the step of the four battalions which follow, musketeers, bowmen, sword-and-buckler men, spearmen and last but not least, artillery men, glancing lovingly at their guns carried by double files of patient native tlammemes. Last of all, on a chestnut mare, Alvarado, riding alone, hatless, with his red hair shining in the sun.

What a sight ! Who had ever seen such men, such animals, such war-machines ? Who could doubt but that this march was a portent, that a new era was dawning ? In temples and teocallis, the priests shook their black, solid manes of hair, thick-set with dried human blood, and the drops of blood still fresh in their ear-wounds fell on to their shoulders. "A new era, yes. But would it bring happiness to men ?"

7

The troops were comfortably settled in quarters which, after their past hardships, seemed to them luxurious, and the captains were led to Xicotencatl's palatial house. The great moment had come. The hall was simple but not devoid of greatness. The Spanish captains, with Father Olmedo and the priest Díaz, were gathered at one end of the hall ; there was a free, empty space in front of them. Opposite, a wide door, beyond which could be seen several halls, flooded with sunlight. Old Xicotencatl entered the hall followed by the other tlatoanis as well as by the two generals, his own son and Chichimecatecuhtli. Each of these Tlaxcatec notables brought two young maidens by the hand. They were dressed in simple cotton huipils (a luxury in Tlaxcala, where cotton was a rarity), and wore their hair hanging straight down their backs.

"Malintzin," said Maxiscatzin to spare the old man's voice, "welcome. You have made us wait. You have mistrusted us. But we forgive you because the treacherous Mexicans had deceived you about our intentions." Doña Marina, standing by Cortés, translated it all. The tlatoani went on : "We must be friends for ever. As a token of friendship, here are our daughters whom we present to you."

Cortés received the youthful present with his usual grace. Then, to the surprise and grief of all the proud chiefs, he added: "Yet, for the present, they must remain with their parents."

The tlatoanis exchanged glances of doubt and surprise. "First of all," Cortés went on, "before we come to such intimate terms, we must be of one faith. You must first hear what my priest has to say. Then, we will accept the girls."

Father Olmedo then came to the fore and stood by Doña Marina. He began by explaining that there was only one God, who lived on high—and he pointed to heaven. The Tlaxcatecs, who were all adepts of the sun, thought this most reasonable and they connected this faith in the sun as the only god of the Whites with the colour of the hair of many of the Spaniards. So far, agreement could be complete. The Tlaxcatecs glanced at each other as if to signal to each other a mutual "all clear."

The priest went on developing his cosmogony. This God had one only son, whom he had had by a virgin who remained a virgin after his birth. He then brought out and exhibited a picture of the Mother and Child. "This is the Virgin and this is her Son. She had Him by the operation of the Holy Ghost and she was, is and always shall be a Virgin."

A cloud of deep concern passed over the virile faces of the Tlaxcatecs. This was a most serious matter. Could it be that these men were not begotten in the usual way and that their women conceived without them, by some visitation from the sun or from some other divine agent? Were then their own daughters to remain for ever virgin and sterile? Was it worth while offering them at all? Xicotencatl the Young smiled with an "I told you so" air, for it was obvious that men who had beaten him were bound to be somehow or other unusual. The tlatoanis glanced at each other, worried beyond words. Father Olmedo went on: "You must give up your gods, which are not gods but devils, spirits doomed to evil and to impotence before the power of the holy true God. Then we shall see."

Maxiscatzin answered: "Malintzin, our gods are good enough for us. We have heard things which have upset us deeply. We did not offer our girls for them to remain for ever virgins——" Doña Marina laughed outright. "What did he say?" asked Cortés. Doña Marina translated Maxiscatzin's outburst. There was a ripple of smiles in the Spanish soldiery, while the Tlaxcatecs waited with their foreheads clouded with mistrust. Doña Marina then explained to Maxiscatzin that the Spaniards would take their girls as wives as soon as they had all given up their false gods. But Maxiscatzin asked to think it over. The spell of the first, innocent friendship was broken. The Tlaxcatec notables left the room with their girls.

8

Cortés let them go with a smile. He could smile in the gravest circumstances and this was one of the gravest for him. He was a conqueror by nature, but he was a civiliser by faith. His highest purpose was to open out those new, still recondite lands, to the light of the only true faith. He was not in a mood to let things die at the mercy of a few benighted stubborn caciques. "Gentlemen," he said, turning to his captains and soldiers, "this insult to Our Lord must be avenged. We are but a worthless band of adventurers if we are not ready at any moment to lay down our lives for our faith." The captains glanced at each other. Some, like youthful Sandoval, or Alonso, were for a fight, so that the state once taken over, the christianisation of the subjects could be undertaken swiftly. Others, like Velázquez de León, who had come for the fun and the business of it, cared not a brass farthing whether the natives went to hell or to heaven, demurred and found Cortés far too rash. But no one dared answer. Then Father Olmedo spoke.

He was dressed in a set of rags which managed to keep a semblance of a monkish frock by some divine dispensation. He was yellowish and thin as a man who fasts often and eats but little when he does not fast. But he had an easy-going, worldly and reasonable way with others. "Sir, one cannot make Christians with swords and spears. It must be done by words and by the grace of God. These native lords seemed to me most friendly. That is a good beginning for a Christian. Let us take it as it comes and build on it gradually."

Velázquez de León combed his blond beard with his thick, long fingers and said: "The friar has spoken well, by the— Forgive me, Father, I meant to swear in your honour. Sir, let us follow his advice, christen the girls, which is what matters and take them with us to please their parents and ourselves." Cortés glanced round his captains. Sandoval and Alonso were red with shame but silent. Cortés challenged them. "Well, what have you to say?" Alonso knew that Sandoval was never able to express himself. He was perhaps the finest soldier in the army but no speaker. "Sir," said the handsome interpreter, "I own that Father Olmedo spoke the true doctrine. Nevertheless, I think that when one is as sure as we are of bringing the truth of God, one has the duty to seize power and then establish it from above. I have tried the other way and know it is bound to fail. On the other hand—" He broke off. "Yes?" asked Cortés. "Forgive me, sir, if I venture to tender advice to your Lordship." "I asked for it," observed Cortés. "Tlaxcala is not at the summit of power in this land. I believe it is best to take Tlaxcala as a step on to

Mexico and therefore we might let things wait, conquer Tenochtitlán and then christianise the whole land from the very top." Cortés smiled with pride in his youthful captain. "Go and bring the caciques back," he ordered.

Presently Alonso came back with the tlatoanis and the girls. "Friends," said Cortés, "we shall let our differences about the gods stand for the present. We are grateful to you for your presents of girls and will accept them. But we must have them baptised first." This seemed to the tlatoanis a reasonable request, the more so as the Aztec word for *baptise* described one of their own religious habits. Yet Xícotencatl the Young, with his eye on race and on beating the Mexicans, asked with a frown of mistrust: "None of your Holy Ghosts for our girls, I suppose? We want men, not phantasms, for our grandchildren!" When Doña Marina translated this the captains became merry and the soldiers bawdy. Cortés said to Alonso: "Tell him he need not worry about that."

9

Alonso had thought it wise to house Ixcawatzin in his own quarters, to make sure the priests would not try to secure him after all for the bloody ceremonies. That night, after a busy day, he was able at last to speak to his prisoner with some leisure. Ixcawatzin said: "You meant well and I thank you for it, but do not think that you have saved my life. My life cannot be saved. I was a warrior of the highest class. Having fallen a prisoner, if I do not die on a Tlaxcatec altar, I shall be killed by my countrymen. And rightly so."

Alonso was moved by the firm, simple tone of these words. "Here," he felt, "is a strong faith indeed." And in his searching, honest mind, he went on: "I know many a Christian who might well envy it." Reasoning as a member of the Spanish nobility he asked: "You must be of high-born blood." Ixcawatzin answered: "My grandfather was a king." Long Face, who was present, whispered in Spanish: "Ask him which king?" And Alonso retorted: "Ask him yourself." But Long Face would not do such a thing. He felt too humble before the native prince. Alonso then put the question: "Was your grandfather a king of Tetzcuco?" And Ixcawatzin answered: "Yes. His name was Nezawal Coyotl. One of his daughters was my mother." Long Face could no longer hold his curiosity. "Then, sir," he asked directly, "You must be the boy who was punished after Xuchitzin's baptism." Ixcawatzin looked at Long Face for a while in silence and concluded: "Then, you must be Citlali's husband." Long Face was dumbfounded. "Did you know . . . do you still remember my wife?"

You cannot have been seven when she died ! ” Ixcawatzin shook his head. “ Citlali is alive. I saw her a few moons ago. ” While Long Face fathomed these portentous words, Ixcawatzin added : “ She thinks you are dead. ”

Long Face said nothing. He had been plunged into that remote past and, with the eyes of his imagination he saw Citlali disappearing from his life on the background of a tender early-morning sky. But Ixcawatzin also was plunged into a sombre dream by this discovery, for he remembered that in the picture left by Moteczuma on Xuchitl’s bed, Citlali had recognised Long Face close to the portrait of a white, golden-haired man. It was therefore plain that the white man whom Xuchitl was expecting, who was to save her, the man he, Ixcawatzin, had failed to find in the Otomi settlement, was this Alonso Manrique who had broken the bars of his jail.

“ Why should it trouble me ? ” he asked himself, “ Am I not to die soon, one way or another ? ” And yet, deep down in his austere soul, he felt an unbearable anguish which he could not explain nor soothe away.

10

Cacama entered Xuchitl’s room with a dark, frowning expression on his none too friendly face. He had inherited his father’s rigid features and tendencies, with none of King Nezawal Pilli’s graceful and wise qualities. He was straight but narrow. “ What are you doing ? ” he asked his half-sister, imperious and impatient. And without waiting for an answer he went on : “ Idling away your time with old picture books ! You might do something for your country. ” Xuchitl glanced at him, at a loss to understand what was the cause of this outburst. But Cacama’s impetuous ways gradually unfolded it to her. “ The country cannot afford to keep such expensive luxuries as you girls. We are threatened by the most dangerous foes we have ever had to face in our history. All must lend a hand. ”

“ Very well. Calm yourself and show me my post, ” retorted Xuchitl quietly. “ Your post ! You know it well. But you refuse to fill it and you run away from it, ” reproached the young king severely. Xuchitl began to suspect what was in her half-brother’s mind. She knew he had repeatedly criticised her refusal to enter Moteczuma’s household as one of the emperor’s distinguished concubines. She cast on him a proud, cold glance and said : “ I do not even imagine what it is you have in mind. ” He was most incensed. “ You know full well what is in my mind. Were you a loyal and disciplined subject of mine and of the emperor, I would not be asking you to behave. The country is threatened, the emperor must stand fast and concentrate his mind on

the outside danger. Is it the time to refuse him anything? And in particular, something so essential to his well-being?"

Xuchitl answered nothing. She was sitting on a mat, with a book of pictograms before her. By her side lay the two cotton picture-reports describing the altar of the copper Cross and the features of the white magician who had made it. She just glanced at this picture and smiled. "In any case," growled Cacama, "I warn you I am not ready to screen you any longer."

"Any longer? When have you screened me?" she asked with the cold intention of one who merely desires to get at the facts. "I am not going to argue," cut in Cacama with authority. "The emperor does not want to apply force to you. He wants you to go to him of your own accord. But I will force you to go. I give you a month. If in twenty days [the duration of an Atzec month] you have not yielded to his wishes, I will send you to him in chains or I will give you over to the priests for the sacrifices of the month."

Xuchitl glanced again at the white man's portrait, smiled and then stared at her brother. "What do you say?" asked Cacama. "I say nothing," answered Xuchitl. And she cast her eyes again on the picture which had been her stand-by ever since it had come into her hand. "What is that?" asked Cacama. "The portrait of the Quetzalcoatl man who will come in time to rescue me from your hands," answered Xuchitl with the simplicity of a firm faith.

Cacama took the cloth in his hands and scrutinized it with his hard eyes, as if he were learning it by heart. "Who is this man here, close to the portrait?" "It must be Long-Face, Citlali's husband," answered Xuchitl. "Was he not dead?" asked Cacama. "So we thought. But evidently he is no longer dead." Cacama grew pale. "Do you mean—" He did not finish the sentence. He was visibly upset. She pressed her advantage home. "And moreover, you know that Ixcawatzin has been betrayed by Motec—" His eyes flashed angrily. She saw he meant to speak, but she repeated: "Yes. Betrayed into slavery and death, to deprive me of his help. Very well. This Sun-man will rescue him also. I warn you."

She was speaking without her book, just remembering the casual remark made by Ixcawatzin the night he had come to take his leave; and thinking that she might throw that in, to increase her enemy's confusion, she had transformed a forecast or a presentment into a certainty. But the effect was the very reverse of the one she meant to achieve. Cacama reacted against her pressure. He threw the painted cloth on to the couch and said: "Nonsense. Remember what I told you. My word is final. Either you go to serve Moteczuma as he wishes to be served or you will be sacrificed. I give you a month."

He turned his back on her and left the room, stiff and stern.

II

When Moteczuma received the news of Cortés' victory over Tlaxcala he fell into a dreadful state of dejection. The strangers were bound to be gods. How could five hundred men beat forty thousand even with the help of hornless deer and noisy tubes? And, how could their chief insist on coming to his capital despite his repeated negatives? He called Cuitlahuac, his brother, lord of Iztapalapa, and young Cacama, king of Tetzcuco, and asked them for their advice.

Cuitlahuac argued that these strangers should be prevented from entering Tenochtlán by all means in the Mexican power, and in the last resort, by force of arms. Cacama's argument was more complicated. "If the strangers are gods," he said, "they will force their way through; if not, we shall always be able to beat them. The best way to find out is to let them come." "What is your own opinion of them?" asked the emperor. "I have none. All I know is that they appear to have power over the dead." Moteczuma was white with fear. "Over the dead? How do you know?" Cacama answered: "I do not know for certain. I said: 'They appear.' One of them, at any rate, goes about with an oarsman who was some twenty years ago in my father's service and who died about seventeen years ago." Moteczuma grew silent and brooded over this revelation for a long time. The two princes stood by respectfully. The dejected emperor was thinking of his sister Papan, thrust back to life after her death by the mere sight of the newcomers. "To be sure," he thought, "they are supernatural creatures who command the regions without doors or windows." He stared at the princes as if he had never seen them before and struggled to come back to earth. "Let us try one final effort," he said at last, with a sigh. "If they escape, we shall have to admit that they are divine, and let them come." He struck his golden gong and asked for the Serpent-Woman. "Do you remember," he asked, "the ravine this side of Cholula?" The Serpent-Woman's thin lips twisted into a smile, showed his white teeth. "We took one thousand prisoners there for Witchilopochtli in the year 4-Reeds." "Just so. Very well. I am going to arrange that the Pale-Faces enter that ravine on their way hither. And you are to arrange that they do not come out of it."

12

Very much against the wishes and advice of his new Tlaxcatec friends Cortés had led his army to Cholula, for though he thought that

they were right in suspecting some ambush there on the part of Moteczuma, he did not want to give the impression that he was afraid. The Mexican ambassadors, who had remained in his camp the better to spy on his movements, strongly advised that course. The four tlatoanis of Tlaxcala objected to it with equal vigour. Cortés, who always laid more stock on spiritual than on material forces, thought the risk of seeming to be afraid more dangerous than the risk of being ambushed by Moteczuma, and he went to Cholula.

It was the sacred town of the Aztecs, dedicated to Quetzalcoatl. Three hundred temples witnessed to the faith of its inhabitants, and the chief of them, on top of the highest hill, was surrounded by walls which could only be repaired with a special cement made with the blood of young children. Cortés noticed many disquieting signs on entering the city: barricaded by-streets, fortified terraces, and even horse-traps here and there, skilfully dissimulated in streets and squares and in the yards of teocallis. But no one would ever have guessed his deep concern as he rode through the town serene and smiling.

The sun was setting when the army was at last settled in its quarters. When the usual precautions had been adopted, food distributed, and he was at last able to look around and think over the situation, he summoned Alonso. "I do not like the look of this place. Go and find out what you can. Send Long Face about. Here: take a few chalchiwitls with you. You may need to buy some people." And he put a leather bag in Alonso's hand which Alonso tied to his waist.

There was a feverish activity everywhere. Local chiefs were coming and going, whispering, winking, meeting or avoiding each other. The teocalli in which the Spanish Army was quartered gradually became the meeting ground of seemingly idle warriors who came and went among the Spaniards for no apparent reason. Alonso began by visiting the chief teocalli. He had tied round each of his wrists a leather band with a magnificent chalchiwitl. He found two priests in the temple and spoke to them of indifferent things, just to give them time to consider the value of the jewels he was wearing on his wrists. "Those stones come from Cempoal," said one of the worthies at last, unable to resist a curiosity which was but the vanguard of his cupidity. "A good eye!" exclaimed Alonso with admiration. "Each must be worth at least a purse of cocoa-almonds," said the other priest. "My chief," threw in Alonso airily, "has many like these. He keeps them for his friends. I won these two in similar occasions. In both cases, I warned him in time of a treachery which was being prepared by enemies parading as his friends." He moved to go. "Are you in a hurry?" asked the first priest. And the second added, "Perhaps, if you stayed, we might tell you some good story." And the first laughing, "Perhaps we might earn some lovely chalchiwitl!" Alonso feigned

not to understand. "You are in a jesting mood!" he said. "Come!" said the first priest, and he led Alonso to the top of the teocalli.

A glorious view. The plain of Cholula spread in all directions a mantle of brown cloth embroidered with the regular green lines of the maguëy fields; closer to them, at the foot of the hill, the three hundred teocallis of the town shone in the setting sun, casting long shadows—a pattern of yellowish pyramids above the seething chequered labyrinths of the town. The priest stretched his left arm in a north-westerly direction. "Do you see that dark patch there, beyond the last house on the edge of the maguëy-field? It is a ravine on the road to Tenochtitlán. Now watch all that happens near that spot. Do you see anything?" Alonso's eyesight was exceptionally good. "Those patches on this side of the ravine," he said, "are men. Many. Thousands of them. And those at the other end also." The priest added, "Yes. Mexicans. If ever you enter the ravine, you will never get out."

They went down the one hundred and fourteen steps of the teocalli. Alonso had undone his chalcuicwits and quietly put them into their hands. "I am certain there is more that you could tell me. When you are ready to speak, come and see me."

At the main gate of the Spanish headquarters he found Long Face waiting for him. "We must not sleep," said Long Face. "I have news to be told in private." Alonso took him to his own quarters. "I struck an old acquaintance. He had no idea I was with you. He is a Chololtec. A soldier. He took me to a tavern and we drank. You know that by now I have learnt to keep my head. But he has not yet. He may, to-morrow. He babbled in his drink. At dawn the Chololtecs will fall on us. They mean to massacre all the Spaniards, but if they fail, Moteczuma has fifty thousand men ready for us in a ravine outside the town on the way to Tenochtitlán."

Alonso reported the matter to Cortés. It was one hour after sunset. Cortés had the biggest hall in the headquarters cleared for action and sent separate messages to all the leaders of Cholula to call on him, for they had to take urgent decisions together. They came gradually and met in the hall, wondering what the Spanish chief wanted of them. He did not trouble to address them. He had them locked in, thus depriving his enemies of leadership. He then set up a roster of captains and soldiers to keep a close eye on events and went to sleep in perfect calm.

At the first glimmers of dawn he was on horseback in the main yard of the headquarters. The place was thronged. He had given orders that not a single Chololtec of those who had entered it should be allowed out again. He had all the chief caciques brought out into the yard under a strong guard, and then, from his horse, he spoke: "I know everything. You brought me here under a mask of friendship

but you plotted our death. You shall die." He raised his left arm. A shot was heard. It was his signal. In a flash the killing began. Screams, panic, blood, death everywhere. His Tlaxcatec allies, fierce enemies of the Chololtecs, were ransacking the town and taking away women and children as slaves and men as food. Alonso reported the fact. Cortés sent him with strong orders that the Tlaxcatec auxiliaries were to leave the town at once and to give back all the goods and persons stolen. But the booty, both of gold and cotton and of slaves, was already on its way to Tlaxcala. A few Chololtec caciques who had never agreed with the official party of their city came to implore pity from Cortés. He put them in charge of the town and asked them to bury the dead and to make peace with Tlaxcala. "It was Moteczuma's fault," they cried. The ambassadors of Mexico were present. Cortés turned to them with a steady, cold eye, then to the Chololtec caciques: "That cannot be believed of so great a lord, that he should betray a friendly visitor."

The Chololtecs left the hall. Left alone with Moteczuma's ambassadors, Cortés turned to them and said: "Report to your master that his honour is more precious to me than it seems to be to him."

13

On orders from Cortés, Alonso left for Tenochtitlán to prepare for the arrival of the Spanish Army. He took with him Ixcawatzin and Long Face as well as a small contingent of Cempoalese auxiliaries. He chose the roundabout way by Tetzcucó, on the advice of both Ixcawatzin and Long Face for, though longer, it was safer, being less under the control of Moteczuma. Alonso was deeply concerned over the events of Cholula. The sight of blood was still as repugnant to him as it had been on that day of his early youth when he had seen the falcon fall upon a hen in Torremala. He loved risk, enterprise and even attack in battles. But the sight of a whole town running here and there, trying in vain to escape death. . . . "Is this the way it is done?" he asked himself. "Is this the way the Gospel is spread?" And his heart ached while his brain answered: "Yes."

His two companions marched by his side, no less self-absorbed. Ixcawatzin was walking towards his shame. He knew he had been betrayed and in his own eyes he felt undiminished. But he also knew that the fact was not known, that it could not be mentioned and that in any case it would not be believed, at least officially. He had to die, and without honour. There was one point, however, on which he was not sure. How would the arrival of the Pale-Faces affect his position? He had a feeling that Alonso assumed that he was his slave, even

though in his manner the Pale-Face treated him as an equal and with the greatest deference. Ixcawatzin felt himself on the border between two eras, in a world of changing standards, in which his life might take an unexpected course.

As for Long Face, the nearer he came to his native land which he had not seen for seventeen years, the more impressed he was with the fact that his wife was alive. Strange ! So, that ghost which he had seen in the early morning as he stalked along, tied to his pole of slavery, must have been no ghost, but Citlali herself ! And she thought him dead ! Why did she run away instead of coming to him ? Perhaps . . . of course, that was it. She must also have thought that he was a ghost. Curse upon ghosts, how terribly they complicated life ! What would Citlali be like ? Seventeen and twenty-two, how much would that be ? He counted on his fingers, with his hands behind his back, so as not to be spotted by his two companions. Thirty-nine. Quite young yet. He found he was quite pleased at the idea.

They were rising towards the last of the passes, the one beyond which they would see the valley and the lagoons of Tenochtitlán. Night overtook them as they were still climbing. But it was a clear, moonlit night, and Long-Face knew a spot right on top of the road where the merchants had built a convenient night-shelter. They decided to walk on.

Suddenly, as they turned a sharp bend they came upon the view of the valley. A commonplace occurrence for his two companions, it took Alonso's breath away. The moon shone with a sharp, cold, steely light, which cast deep, inky shadows over land and water and picked up every smooth surface from which its rays could extract a spark of silver. The light came from behind them so that the lake, which could not reflect it, spread in a dark blue sheet of perfect quiet, a table on which the cities stood like trays of crystals and jewels. There was no artificial light to be seen. Alonso counted three lakes, though in actual fact they were only two, the salt and the fresh ; on his right, the silhouettes of Zampango, Xaltocan and Cuautillan ; opposite, Tenochtitlán, the island city, the Mecca of their quest and the prize of their conquest, behind whose houses and white teocallis rose the towns of Azcapotzalco and Tacuba and the wooden slopes of Chapultepec ; while on his left, Iztapalapa clasped with a silver brooch the circuit of the lake of Chalco. At his feet, Tetzcuco could just be guessed in the black shadow cast by the hill on which they stood.

So that was the heart of the mighty heathen empire which he and his companions were to bring to the light of Christ ! There it lay, with a loveliness and a peace of its own—and a light of its own too, waiting for the dawn. . . .

Waiting for the dawn, Xuchitl was then casting her eyes, faithful and anxious alike, on the same moon-bathed sight. Cacama had just left her after a stormy scene. He had come to remind her that the twenty days of grace expired at midnight and that she had not made the slightest move to contribute what was expected of her to remove the anxiety of the emperor. He, Cacama, was not disposed to have his authority flouted by a frivolous girl. He had given his royal word that she would be sacrificed if she did not comply with his wishes. His word was law. On the following day, she would be sacrificed in the course of the usual ceremonies in honour of Ylamatecutli.

"What!" cried Xuchitl, indignant. "The victim for Ylamatecutli has always been a slave bought by your calpixques!"

"I know," answered the king. "And I don't care. There must be an example." He was hard and rigid, the more so as he felt his authority challenged at the time by his half-brother Vanilla-Face, in revolt on the hilly districts of his kingdom. "Everything is ready and you need not try to escape."

Xuchitl had remained alone with her thoughts. So, if . . . nothing happened in the half-day that remained, she would appear before the whole city in the attire of the victim offered to Ylamatecutli. The priests would come at noon to dress her in white petticoats and a white huipil; over the cotton petticoats she would wear a leather skirt with leather frills made of thin straps from each of which would hang a shell, so that she would walk to her own music. She would wear white leather shoes, a buckler whitewashed with white clay, with a circle of eagle-feathers. Her face would be painted black from the nose downwards and yellow from the nose upwards; and a long wig, crowned with eagle-feathers, would hang over her back. Her soul revolted at all this grotesque masquerade with which her brother wanted to cow her into submission, but she also was rigid and unyielding and she would stand up to him, come what may. Nor was the disguise the worst feature of the ceremony. She had to dance as well while the populace sang round her. Of course Cacama's purpose was clear. As Vanilla-Face was making much headway with the crowd, Cacama wanted to arouse popular enthusiasm by a show of equality. Henceforward, he would suggest with her sacrifice, not even the royal family would be exempt from serving the gods with their blood. If several of Nezawal Pilli's brothers had been sacrificed on foreign altars, why not Nezawal Pilli's daughter on the altars of her own nation? Xuchitl was honest enough to accept the argument as valid. Yet the whole thing revolted her because she guessed that at bottom Cacama's

zeal to ensure the peace of mind of the emperor was not altogether pure and free from a desire to keep Moteczuma on his side in the quarrel over the crown of Tetzcuco.

What had she to do with it? Die. Let her die. She would not dance and she would not give the crowd the spectacle they used to enjoy, of a miserable slave whining and sobbing over her coming death. She would walk coldly and calmly to the sacrificial stone, the only serene human being amidst masked priests and bloodthirsty faithful, till they had cut her head off and offered her heart to the goddess, and then the priest would be free to carry on the festival in the approved fashion, holding her head by her hair and dancing round the teocalli with her head in his hand. She shivered. There was a force deep down in her which made her disbelieve in the whole abominable rite. No, said this secret force. It is all a flight of imagination, but it shall not happen. She remembered her dreams and the signs, every day more frequent, that the golden-haired White man was coming; and she felt that with his coming she would be saved. But . . . where was he? The ceremonies would begin in a few hours, at noon. At sunset, her head would roll over the sacrificial stone. No. Even if he does not come . . . Cacama will not dare carry out his threat. Nor would Moteczuma consent. The idea struck her as odd. Why? She had not even thought of pointing out to Cacama that Moteczuma . . . That only showed to what an extent her mind kept away from the unwelcome image of the emperor. But if she stood her ground and did not yield, would Cacama act? She doubted.

Her eyes beheld the peaceful lagoon. There, far away, in the midst of its quiet water, slept Tenochtitlán, the city which for her had always spelt death. Her husband, Ixcawatzin, now herself. She waited for the dawn.

15

Opposite her, standing on the terrace of his private rooms, Moteczuma was also beholding the moonlit night. He had just received the news of the events of Cholula. The White strangers had easily seen through his plans. His army ambushed in the ravine had wisely withdrawn to the mountain passes. It was obvious that nothing could be concealed from the Whites and nothing could stop them on the battlefield. Their divine nature could not be doubted, particularly since they had killed so many people in Cholula in so short a time. What was he to do? On top of it, they seemed to possess powers over the dead. Suppose they were to bring back Macuilmalinal, his brother, whom everybody in Mexico preferred to him? How could he, Moteczuma, meet his brother's eye, after having sent him to death

in order to be free to do what he liked with Xuchitl? And Nezawal Pilli . . . Suppose Nezawal Pilli were to return? Moteczuma, leaning on the parapet, trembled with fear and could not refrain from an uneasy glance backwards now and then. "Rather dark there!" he thought. Who was going to win? The girl had resisted him now for years. She seemed able to call to her help every possible magical power. Time and again she had put him off with some supernatural event. Cacama was not aware of it, otherwise he would not have taken that rash decision. Threatening her with sacrifice! . . . It was sure to end in another victory for that magic girl. An idea struck him suddenly: could it be that she had inherited her father's magic powers? In that case, would it not be better to make use of her power to arrest the progress of the Whites? No, he concluded. She is already a white in her soul. Another terror arose in him. What if Xuchitl were really a White woman in a Tetzucan body? Nezawal Pilli would have been quite capable of that. Moreover, Nezawal Pilli himself . . . Everybody who had had anything to do with the Whites said they were godless people who did not believe in human sacrifices. And that was exactly Nezawal Pilli's line . . . and Xuchitl's. She never attends a service. Could it be that this family were but an advanced guard of the Whites parading as ours under our skin? In that case, it is better to let things take their course and have her sacrificed to-morrow. "I wish," he concluded, "I had enjoyed her before her death!"

As if his silent thought had resounded in some caves of abysmal blackness; Moteczuma heard a lugubrious voice in the night echo his last mental word: DEATH! . . . He stood up, trembling, trying hard to pierce the boundless night with his eyes and to receive the minutest vibration of her breath in his tense ears. DEEEATH! . . . repeated the voice. It was a woman's voice, steady in its melancholy *diminuendo*. There was a long silence. Then, the same voice wailed: "Oh my children! My children! . . ." It seemed to come from the lagoon itself, as if the myriads of tiny tongues of water which the breeze raised on its surface joined in a chorus of whispers making up that one collective wail: "Oh my children! Whither shall I take you? Whither?" Silence again. Then, far-off, fainter, ever fainter till it ended in a soft sigh: "Whither . . . My . . . children . . . whith . . . er . . ."

Moteczuma fell on the hard stone, terror-stricken, and lost consciousness.

When Alonso woke up the sun was rising. He lay for a while, trying to recapture a fleeting dream, in which he had been immersed

for the later part of the night. All he could remember was the central figure of it—that mother whose native features he knew so well, for they had so often come to him of late and always with an expression of intense urgency and appeal. That night, the lovely face had shone with an intenser light in the midst of general darkness. She seemed to be hounded out of life by some kind of monster, and her eyes were fixed on him—Alonso—with an expression of hope, yet of anxiety, of trust, and yet of doubt.

What could it all mean? He went out of his sleeping quarters. He was seized by an even greater admiration than the night before, at the sight of the valley of Tenochtitlán. The sun was shedding its glorious life over water and earth and giving each feature of the landscape its familiar form and colour. The three lakes were as three clear mirrors for the pure blue sky which acquired in them a temporary abode on earth, filling it with light and air and endowing it with serenity. Round the sheets of quiet contemplation thus cut out by the lakes, the earth rose and fell with all the movement and agitation of activity, here overgrown with fertile and substantial crops or with idle, rhetorical vegetation, there showing bald patches of sterile emptiness, now a dark hollow, grown unhealthy through lack of light, now an aspiring hill or an ambitious mountain rising towards the sky, snow-capped, icy and crystalline; on the edge of the water, the lake-cities, half in land, half on the water, yellow cubes in regular rows or in capricious patterns of which the *teocallis* were the nodal points; and boldly cutting the blue waters with their white straight lines, the three causeways converging from Tetzcuco, Tacuba and Iztapalapa on proud Tenochtitlán, unique in her isolation.

"The sun has risen and all the world has changed," thought Alonso. "A few hours ago it was as black as ink and even the light was cold and lacked penetration. Now, life and warmth and colour everywhere. Let this change be symbolical of that which the Light of the Lord will bring about in this country."

17

"Let this change be symbolical," thought Xuchitl as she reflected on the life the sun was shedding over the lagoon and its cities under her eyes. "What a deep mystery! Just because the sun rises over the hills and its rays fall on the lake and on the whole valley, everything changes; so that the water is not blue, nor the earth brown, nor trees green, but the sun is everything! Let it be symbolical. Who knew what the earth was like till the sun rose to tell him? How do I know

who I am till a sun rises to tell me and show me my true colours? Oh sun! Father of light and father of all truth, will you rise to-day? Shall I go to the dark night of shame to meet another sun, or will the sun come to me and reveal me to myself? Shall I die or shall I be reborn?"

She had not slept the whole night. Now that the day had come to dispel her night-shadows and dreams, that day which might be her last, she felt drowsy. She lingered on, reluctant to leave the lovely view which she knew so well—yet, in the end, conquered by fatigue, she withdrew and fell asleep.

Shortly before midday Citlali woke her up. Xuchitl noticed that her faithful companion's eyes were red with weeping. She said nothing. There was nothing she could say. While Citlali prepared her bath, she lay on her bed, feeling more at peace than she had hoped whenever she had imagined that atrocious day. Citlali rose from her stooping position, stood in front of her and in a firm voice which brooked no contradiction, announced: "I am going with you." Xuchitl smiled at her with her deep eyes. "I am going with you," repeated Citlali, "I should have gone with your mother." The shame of her past weakness and betrayal still rankled in her heart. "You cannot do such a thing, Citlali. Remember. Your husband is coming back." Citlali stood silent for a while. She was still the same quiet-looking, starry-eyed woman of her earlier days, and save for a few silver threads in the ebony of her hair, looked almost as young. Her skin was smooth and fresh, despite the years. "How do we know? Just a picture in those reports about the men of Quetzalcoatl. There are many men with long faces . . ." She mused for a while, picking up memories in the fields of her dreamscape. "I saw his ghost. I am sure of that . . ." She was silent again. "Of course, if the Quetzalcoatl men can bring people back from . . . it would be strange if Long-Face were to arrive here when I had just left . . ."

By some subtle mental alchemy, this thought which Citlali had just put into words strengthened Xuchitl's faith in the timely arrival of her White saviour. It would be too ludicrous if Citlali were to leave and Ixtlicoyu return; if she herself were to be sacrificed when her rescuer was at hand. She was washing her body clean in the hot earthenware tub, whether for sacrifice or for her glorious entrance into a new life, she did not know. But with the utmost composure and calm, she made herself as beautiful as it was in her power. She chose a white embroidered huipil and white sandals and, by some secret instinct, she decided to wear no jewels but the unique and solitary heart of jade.

18

As the sun reached the zenith, a rolling of the sacred drum was heard. Citlali shook like a leaf. "That was not in the teocalli. It was in the palace-yard!" Xuchitl had no time to answer. Her half-brother, King Cacama, had raised the curtain of her room and stood in front of her, clad in his official robes. He wore the blue mantle, the blue cactli or shoes, the blue diadem. His lower lip was loaded with a chalchiwitl which kept it hanging down, uncovering his white teeth down to the blood-red gum.

"For the last time, Xuchitl, spare me this day." He was furious with her. He did not want such an exhibition of cruelty and feared its effects on the people. But he was determined to have his way.

"I have nothing to say. You know my stand," answered Xuchitl with a firm voice.

The king turned his back on her and shouted an order.

19

The priests filed into Xuchitl's room. They came to fetch her for the first part of the ceremony: the dressing and painting of the victim. Each brought one of the implements or garments on a tray of black wood. They filed into the room in rhythm with the beat of the teponaztli which could be heard through the open window, and stood in an imposing row, black-robed and black-masked, along the walls of the hall. The chief priest came last. He was not masked. He was painted, the lower part of the head black, the top part yellow—the two colours which presently would cover Xuchitl's fair face. He took Xuchitl by the hand and led her out of the room, followed by the other priests. Citlali walked beside her mistress. No one prevented her; no one seemed to take any notice of her.

The teponaztli beat on its melancholy, gloomy, ever repeated thump, and the solemn procession, in tune with it, emerged into the square court, that very court in which, nineteen years earlier, Xuchitl had been baptized and Ixcawatzin had been caught unawares by the midwife's call. Its gallery was as thronged with eager women as on that occasion and many of them remembered how on that day they had predicted that Xuchitl's first home would be destroyed by violence—as indeed it had been—and how she would be exiled and would change her name. "But we had not predicted this!" they said, and they shook their heads with sadness, and some of them had tears in their eyes.

The chief priest had placed Xuchitl in the centre of a semi-circle of priests so that she faced the arched gateway. She was pale, but perfectly composed. She had been offered a plate of sacred mushrooms, the exhilarating drug which victims were made to take so that they had the strength to dance themselves to the sacrificial stone ; but she had refused them and the priests, bearing in mind her birth, had not insisted. The ceremony began with a short address by the chief priest to the victim :

" Daughter," the chief priest began, " I dedicate you to——"

Suddenly, Xuchitl's face was transfigured. Her eyes shone like two stars, her face was luminous with joy and she seemed to have grown taller, to stand on tiptoe, almost to float in mid-air. Every one followed the direction of her eyes. At the gate, under the arch, a sun-haired, sky-eyed man, clad in black copper, stood smiling at Xuchitl. On his right frowned Ixcawatzin. On his left grinned Long Face.

20

The priests, at first paralysed by a holy terror, fled before the vision. A murmur of astonishment, hushed by awe and by fear, ran through the women under the gallery. In the upper galley, where, hidden from the public eye, Cacama had been witnessing the ceremony, the sight of the White man, and even more so that of Ixcawatzin and Long-Face aroused a panic, not only in the king but also in his attendants, who remembered Long Face and believed him dead. Alonso and Xuchitl smiled into each other's eyes. They had seen each other in so many dreams that their faces were mutually familiar. Alonso thought of his recent nightly visions. Not in vain had he been urged to arrive as soon as possible by those eyes which appealed to him in his dream and were now bathing him in their loving light. He was familiar enough with native ways to realise at a glance that Xuchitl had been on the eve of perishing on the sacrificial stone of some bloodthirsty deity. " I am thankful, oh Lord," he prayed mentally, " that I was permitted to save this precious soul." Meanwhile she dreamt and lived all in one that true yet unbelievable instant. He had come, and in time, A flutter as if the white wings of some unearthly bird had suddenly awakened in her heart, made her run forward, fly forward, for she felt as if she were wafted through the still air—and she alighted with folded wings by his side. He put his right arm round her and held her close to him.

How little she is ! How big he is ! She felt at last safe, at home at last. How could that be ? She did not know who he was, whence he came. She had not yet heard the sound of his voice. He was not

of her people, of her world. And yet, she had never been at home till she had seen him and taken refuge in his arms.

Meanwhile, her soft, warm form was conquering his heart through the steely walls of his armour. The little being nestling up close to him like a bird in its nest, was awakening many a tender trend in his soul, melting many a brook which lay frozen under the icy conditions of the hard world in which he had lived so long. He was absorbing love through his side, that side on which she was pressing her subtle body ; through his nostrils, which breathed in the new feminine aroma—roses, definitely roses—which the new being emanated ; through his shoulder, which felt the weight of her arm resting there in complete abandon. Thought had vanished. Desire was still asleep. It was just bliss, harmony, life flowing within life with nothing but life in its flow.

Book Three

FAITH WITHOUT BLASPHEMY

PART XII

THE MOTHER AND CHILD AND THE HEART OF JADE

I

ALONSO felt the sweet burden suddenly heavier. Xuchitl had fainted in his arms. He lifted her as if she were a child. Citlali ran towards him and cried : "Here, sir. This way." Long Face followed. Xuchitl was laid on her couch and soon after came to, smiling at Alonso with a happy smile.

Without turning her eyes from him, she said : "Citlali, prepare some rooms for my lord. Ask Cacama's steward—I don't even know the man's name ! My father's rooms are empty. See that he is given them." Alonso thought : "What a voice ! How deep it can penetrate with its quiet, clear tones !" Then, aloud : "My lady need not trouble. I have already settled in the *teocalli*." She looked disappointed. "Am I to see you now and then ?" And he : "As often as you wish and my duties allow." "Your duties ?" she asked. "Has my Lord any duties ?" He smiled at her naïvete. "I came to prepare the arrival of my comrades. There are many and they come from far-off lands with different habits. Everything must be thought out in advance." She had listened to the music of the words but not to their sense. "It is like a sunrise !" she said to herself rather than to him. "Yes," he answered. "That is what we want it to be. A sunrise on this fair land. When I saw the valley and the two lagoons last night, under the cold, feeble light of the moon, I dreamt of——" She sat up, smiling with her eyes, and finished his sentence, "... the sunrise, yes, the light of dawn ! And I thought of my soul which has lived all these years in the darkness of night and longing for the Sun." Her hands were stretched out towards him. But he stood at the foot of the couch on which she sat and did not move towards her. He had never been so stirred by any woman before. Not only were her features, her voice, her way of moving and speaking slowly permeating him with an atmosphere of deep, ineffable tenderness, and arousing his manly desire, but he was also thinking of the repeated visions in which he had beheld her ever since that day when he fell unconscious at the

foot of the altar at Moor's Hill. The Lord had chosen her for him. This idea was rising triumphantly in his soul and releasing him from his vow. But the long years of discipline which he had successfully inflicted upon himself could not be shed in one instant, however tense, and he stood outwardly quiet and self-controlled, while she was at the summit of a passionate longing, which had lasted interminable years. "My lord ! My lord !" she cried.

He looked at her with so much love that she was bathed in bliss. "This is heaven," she thought, under what for her was the almost miraculous impression of his blue-coloured eyes. But he did not move. "There is but one Lord," he said, "and he dwells far above you and me. He sent me here to save you . . . And I believe he sent you here to save me." Her eyes shone with delight. "Me ! To save you !" "Yes," he repeated with a grave voice. "You to save me. Some day, soon, I hope, I shall explain this mystery to you. It is a deep and wonderful mystery. As I see you, not for the first time, for I have seen you often in my dreams——" "Oh," she cried, "you also ! I have seen you so often . . . ever since you landed so violently from a big black canoe, with a black-bearded man." He was deeply moved and impressed and in his innermost self, he prayed : "I am thankful, oh Lord !" Then, to her, with an even firmer and surer voice : "That strengthens my faith and my conviction. As I see you, I feel sure that you are meant to be mine, and I yours and that we are both meant to serve Him who brought us to each other. My name is Alonso." "Mine is Xuchitl," she said, and blushed.

Her eyes, for the first time, ceased to look at him. They were now half-closed. Alonso was fascinated by her beauty. The white, slightly yellow complexion like a tea-rose . . . ("Yes," said his sensuous memory—"that is her aroma"), throbbed with a rosy bloom as she blushed, giving her name, her person, to him. Her hands were crossed over her breast. He rushed forward, fell on his knees and hugged her to him for a long time, struggling with a mad desire to kiss her mouth. "Why not ?" said his desire. His stubborn will answered : "Because I will not have it—yet !" He won. He rose and said : "Xuchitl, my soul," She thrilled as she heard this way of endearing, unknown in her native language. "Xuchitl, I must now attend to my duties. Be at rest. You are mine and no one can hurt you now." He smiled and left the room.

When Cacama saw the Quetzalcoatl man accompanied by two men who were both believed to be dead, he was seized with a holy

terror. He took his canoe and hastened to report the matter to Moteczuma. "What!" exclaimed the emperor, "Ixcawatzin? But I know for certain he was the first on the list of victims in Tlaxcala over a month ago!" The two monarchs glanced at each other, dejected, frightened, nonplussed. "There is such power in the man," added Cacama, "that all my priests fled when they saw him."

"How can we expect to defend Tenochtitlán against them if one of them is enough to make your priests run away?" asked Moteczuma. Cacama was brave. "Soldiers are not priests!" he protested. Moteczuma, however, was more terrified of supernatural powers than of anything soldiers might have to face from mere soldiers. "Let us begin," he said, "by propitiating those White Gods in so far as we can. Where is Ixcawatzin?" No one knew. "He must be fetched. See to it, Petalcalcatl. He must be restored to his dignities and privileges as if he had never been caught. And as for those two traitors, Open-Wound and the other, who allowed him to be caught, let them be skinned alive." The emperor knew full well that they had done no more than obey his orders, but the position had changed. Then the plan was to have Ixcawatzin caught. Now the plan was to propitiate the White God who (for some reason he could not fathom) had an interest in Ixcawatzin. His attitude was therefore perfectly logical and consistent.

As to the strange White Gods, there was but one policy left—that which Cacama had advocated from the beginning: let them enter the town. If they were actual gods, they would be able to in any case; if they were not, the Mexicans would be able to destroy them. Moteczuma gave Cacama instructions to sally forth and receive them. Even then he was to try to send them back. But if they insisted, he should lead them to Tenochtitlán, with as good a countenance as he was able to summon.

3

When Ixcawatzin saw Xuchitl run and embrace Alonso, he slipped away from the royal palace. No one noticed his flight. He went straight to the Calmecac and entered it by the back-door, reserved for the slaves who performed the menial services. He was wearing his hair flat and was dressed in henequen clothes, in the manner of the most despised part of the population. A priest who happened to be giving orders to the staff recognised him, and at once sized up the situation. He glanced at him with undisguised contempt.

"I must die soon," said Ixcawatzin. "But meanwhile, I must eat. I have walked twenty miles since dawn. Give me something to eat."

While putting some maize tortillas within his reach, the priest asked, "How did it happen?" "It is a long story—and not very clear either," answered Ixcawatzin. He ate heartily, but did not speak. "What do you mean to do?" the priest asked. "I am going to offer myself for one of the monthly sacrifices. The sooner the better." The priest was studying his vigorous, supple body. "You might work for us, meanwhile. We are short of men. Moteczuma takes every young man away for his wars. I would put you to build pens for our Tlaxcatec victims. Those we had have been burnt in the last fire." Ixcawatzin was going to ask "Which fire?" when he remembered that a slave such as he then was had no right to ask questions. He followed the priest, who led him to the backyard, showed him the wood and the tools and left him at work.

"This is a strange life," he thought, as with axes and saws made of obsidian he cut through the planks. "Both Xuchitl's pictures and my own observations of the stars turned out to be right. A sun-haired man has saved us both. Xuchitl was quick to recognise her saviour. How she ran to hang herself on his neck! There is nothing left for me but to die . . . It strikes me, though, that my constellation was not quite prophetic. To be saved from the Tlaxcatecs and to return to Tenochtitlán as a slave-victim to be sacrificed or rot by the roadside, is not to be saved." He split a plank with a savage blow from his axe. A shadow stood before him.

"Sir," he said. He had recognised the Chief Priest. The old wrinkled face was smiling at him. "Ixcawatzin, the Emperor has sent instructions about you. He knows you were betrayed. He has given orders to have you restored to your honours and privileges. Open-wound and his companion are to be sacrificed for having betrayed you."

He was dumbfounded. Why! The Emperor knew it all. He, and no one else, had been the cause of it all. And then, to begin again, to take on a load of duties and sacrifices when in any case he knew life was not worth living! . . . But why? Why was life not worth living? He was certain of it, but he could not say why. Perhaps because the wrinkled old man was there, smiling at him, but as soon as he was left alone with his planks and his tools, he would remember and he would enjoy his grief and his despair and be happy that soon he would die on the stone as a coward and be done with it. . . . But what was this wrinkled old man saying? "You are surprised! No wonder. A unique case. Come quick and thank Witchilopochtli and Quetzalcoatl, and meanwhile we shall prepare your attire. You remain the pride of the Calmecac."

Ixcawatzin followed, gloomy and downcast, sentenced to life.

"All the same," said Long Face. "You might have come forward and tried to find out, instead of running away."

"How could I imagine," argued Citlali, "that you would leave me alone the whole night on the eve of my departure for the place without doors——" He cut off these unpleasant memories with a purely general observation. "Odd people, those Whites!" It was a sincere proof of his intellectual detachment. "Are they gods or men?" asked Citlali. "I do not believe they are gods, unless my master be one," answered Long Face. He did not seem to be sure about this point. "Why your master and not the others?" asked his wife. "My master is not like the others, not at any rate like most of the others. He is not interested in gold and never touches a woman. If he demanded human sacrifices, I should say he was a god for certain. But he does not want that either. I can't make him out."

Citlali picked up what interested her most out of this sketch of Alonso. "Are you sure he never touches a woman?" "I can only speak of what I have seen. The other Pale-Faces fall lustily on them as soon as they have an opportunity. He, never." Citlali grew very concerned. "Perhaps he has not yet found what he wants. There are people like that, who are very particular." Long Face was not especially interested in the subject. "Then," he went on, reverting to the general theme, "these Pale-Faces are most devout worshippers of their gods." "Have they as many gods as we have?" she asked. "I believe so. But the main one is a god whom they always erect everywhere they go. It is made up of two pieces of wood, one straight down and one straight across. It represents a god-man-beast who was born of a woman and a ghost, and now he was like a ghost and appeared in the clouds and walked over the water—that is when he was a god—and now he was taken prisoner and given slaps in the face and spat upon by his enemies, who put on his head a wreath of thorns—and that was when he was a man—and now he turned into an animal they have over there in their country which they call lamb, which is rather like a deer save that it is also a tree because every year it gives out a cotton crop."

She had followed this summary of Christian theology seen through Aztec eyes with growing wonder, till it came to that cotton crop. "Come, come. A deer cannot give cotton, can it?" Long Face was not so sceptical. "Why? It gives some kind of hair. Suppose it gave more hair and curlier. I don't say it would be cotton, but it would be just as good." Citlali was thinking it over. "Then, they have a goddess who is the mother of that god. And she remained a virgin

all her life." "That," observed Citlali, "does not seem to me so very strange. For after all, Witchilopochtli was born of a ball of down and a woman, and his mother might have been left a virgin all her life, for all that Witchilopochtli cared about it."

"And then, there are ever so many more gods, one at least for every day of the year." Citlali was shocked. "How terrible! That must mean a regular river of blood. We only worship one god a month and our warriors can hardly keep our priests supplied with enough victims!" "They do not sacrifice men. That is the odd thing about them. They have lots of gods, but do not kill people in their honour. I don't know why. It does not seem to have struck them as odd." Citlali was nonplussed. "But then, what on earth do they do during their religious service?" "They pray. And the priest eats and drinks. Very little, indeed. He eats a tiny piece of white paste no bigger than the palm of the hand and so thin that you can see the light through it; and he drinks a tiny amount of a kind of teometl they make. And they all believe that what he eats and drinks are the flesh and the blood of their god."

Husband and wife remained silent for a long pause.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Long Face.

"I don't know. . . . Rather bewildering, isn't it?"

"Would you care to become a Christian?" Citlali was surprised. "Why do you ask?" He looked shamefaced and a little foolish. He had never felt quite at ease when tackling matters of mental import with his wife, in whom he guessed a superior. "The fact is," he explained, unable to keep his secret from her—"that I promised my master to convert you to our religion." This was not quite the case. The case was that Long Face, who loved Alonso, had imagined it would afford his master the deepest pleasure to know that Citlali had been converted. "You are a Christian, then?" she asked, without any special emotion in her voice. He smiled, relieved at the ease with which the revelation had been received. Citlali did not speak. She seemed to be considering his proposal.

"What happens after death?" she asked at last. Long Face explained. "There are three places. Those who die without sin, or with their sins forgiven—" "What is sin?" asked Citlali. Long Face scratched his head. "My master explains that beautifully, but I don't remember his words. . . ." He suddenly brightened up. "I'll tell you an easy way out. There are ten rules. You must not break them. They are pretty simple, you know? I will tell you some day. You must not kill . . . you must not lie . . . that kind of thing."

"As we teach our children . . ." asked Citlali by way of explanation.

"Yes. More or less. Very well. If you die without ever having

broken them, you go to the first place, where you are for ever happy and never die. If you have broken them but wish you hadn't, you go to the second place, where you burn in flames for a very long time, till you are purified by the fire, and then you are raised to the first; and if you are a hopeless rascal, who not only broke all the rules, but are glad you did, then you go to the third place, where you are tormented all the rest of time by fearful ghosts known as devils."

"And does all that happen as you say, whatever the disease or other cause of death?" "Absolutely. The cause of death has nothing to do with it," asserted Long Face, sure for once of his theology. Citlali was a business-like sort of person. "You said that those who went to the first region were those who had not broken the rules, or if they had, those who had been forgiven . . ." "That is it." "Forgiven, by whom?" Long Face had to think that over. "I believe," he answered, "that forgiveness must come from the Chief-God himself. But it is spoken by the priest." There was another silence. "Well?" asked Long Face again.

"Yes . . . I would not mind . . . I suppose the priests are not very strict about forgiving. Otherwise," added the wise Citlali, "the first place must be rather solitary and I don't see how people can be happy in an empty house."

Long Face took these words of his wife for an acceptance of the Christian faith and he reported it instantly to Alonso as the first conversion which he had made.

5

When, after those fleeting yet eternal moments spent in the strong grip of his arms, Xuchitl was left alone, she felt as if a new world of the spirit had been revealed to her. She had often dreamt of love; but never had she imagined it as such a blissful state, such a profound happiness, without the slightest commotion of the bodily instincts. In the unforgettable experiences of that early afternoon, two instants passed and passed again like waves of remembered delight through her newly awakened sensibility—that in which she had met the loving glance of his deep, blue eyes, and that in which she had sunk with her eyes closed, in his strong embrace. Was it possible for a human being to be so deeply, so instantly absorbed into another human being as she had felt absorbed in him during those two moments of bliss? And her joy at finding that it was, that it had actually happened to her, made her mind giddy. She loved him, oh, how she loved him! Suddenly she remembered the childish questions she put to Citlali

after she had heard the scene between King Huemac's daughter and the Toveyan Indian. "When I see the man I want to marry, shall I feel a——" Her mind receded from the appalling thought, horror-stricken, and in the privacy of her solitary room, she blushed crimson. How far she was from those days! How transfigured already by his marvellous glance! Xuchitl remembered the furtive glances of repressed desire which she had sometimes surprised in Ixcawatzin; the ghoulis, sensuous glance of Moteczuma, shamelessly winding itself round her whole body like a slimy serpent—many more glances still of other sensuous men . . . That was all that love had meant for her till those limpid blue eyes had penetrated through her own, right into her inner being and had made her feel a happiness so free from bodily weight. There was a world, she thought, a world of light, in which the most perfect bliss could be attained—for it was nothing but the blue light of his eyes that had made her happy. When she was little and, either with her father or alone, used to look at the stars, she had often felt happy, she knew not why, under the silvery light which they shed; they seemed to her like eyes, clear, purposeful eyes which meant to impart something. Light has nothing to do with things that are heavy, she thought. Love is in a glance. The deepest love is in a glance. Union, the deepest union is in the meeting of two souls through the melting together of two glances. Next to that . . . the other thing is but heavy, slow work, heavy, slow pleasure.

Her past life seemed to her as a mere prelude to that unique instant. Her experience had been but the gathering of successive harvests wherewith to enrich that being which she was now giving him. She had lived within a closed world in which all eyes were like hers, so that she could now the better feel the difference between her world and his. She knew that the unforgettable impact of his glance was due precisely to that distance between the two worlds in which they had lived till then. In his eyes, she had seen nothing with which she was familiar. They were orbs of new life for her, new planets, new stars never before observed. She had bathed in their light. Some day she would know them and their world in more detail. But she knew already that from that moment in which she had entered his world through the limpid gates of his eyes, she had become a new being. She was reborn.

6

Alonso had been moving here and there the whole afternoon, intent on his work. His mission was twofold. He had to prepare the material details for the reception of the Spanish Army in Tenochtitlán; and to acquire as much information as he could on the plans and forces of the emperor. He had thought it wiser to establish his headquarters in Tetzcuco, not far from the capital, and yet not actually in it. Towards the evening he withdrew to his headquarters and instructed Long Face to bar all access to him. He wanted to be alone. He felt he was approaching a crucial moment in his life. He was an earnest soul. Two faces came and went in his imagination: the tender, smiling, moved face of Xuchitl, a rose opening its dew-moist petals to the first rays of love; and the stern, fiery, austere face of the Cardinal, forgiving him for his civil crime but laying on him a terrible, life-long penitence. The deepest, strangest voice within him said that the first face would win. Xuchitl would win over the Cardinal. Love would win over—duty? The hard world in him revolted. No, He would not yield. He owed it to the law of God not to yield. "The law of God . . . but God is love . . . and love calls me to her . . ." he thought. Alonso felt again caught in that dilemma which had puzzled him all his life. He was not aware to what an extent the steel in his character which he owed to his Visigothic and Arabic ancestors, to the Northern and to the Southern heathens in him, was stiffening his virtue against the allurements of love which reached him mostly through the sensuous channels of his Jewish blood and of his pleasure-loving Latin ancestry; nor how firmly that strength which in the remote past of some of his races had run riot into brute force, was now harnessed in the service of law and virtue by his Jewish and Hispano-Roman bloods trained by centuries of culture under Rome and Jerusalem.

He was not merely a Spaniard. He was a complete Westerner, an epitome of all the trends of the European world. Had he remained in Spain, he would not have been able to find any woman distant enough from what he had in him to create a tension sufficient for love. While he was by no means able to analyse all this, he had definitely felt that tension of strangeness as soon as his eyes had fallen on Xuchitl's eyes and through them had been able to penetrate right to the core of that mysterious Aztec world which had so far remained inaccessible to him. Xuchitl was a pure Aztec, but through some predestined proclivity as well as by the peculiar rationalistic turn of mind which she owed to her father and grandfather, she lived on the spiritual edge or frontier of her world, looking out on to other possible worlds. She

had, in one word, spiritual windows opening out to realities outside her own. These windows were incarnated in her deep, clear, receptive eyes, through which Alonso had been able to enter the Aztec mystery.

Alonso felt all this more or less obscurely. It deepened his conviction that his meeting with Xuchitl had been preordained—a conviction which he had formed when he discovered that they had dreamt of each other more than once before actually casting eyes on each other. But this discovery added to the strain, for it was obvious that it led to love and that love between a healthy man and a healthy woman was bound to lead to a situation incompatible with his vow of chastity. The austere face of the Cardinal rose again before his mind.

What was he to do? He did not know yet. Perhaps Father Olmedo . . . he thought vaguely, without pursuing his thoughts to the end. He disliked all humbug and comedy. He resolved not to see Xuchitl till he had made up his mind.

7

He was sitting on a low ycpalli in a room which had belonged to one of the Chief Priests. The window was open. A fresh breeze laden with a complex aroma of many flowers—the royal gardens of Nezawal Coyotl were close by—came to sweeten and purify the air of the room itself, the walls of which were impregnated with the priestly smells; copal, tobacco and putrified human blood. There was hardly any furniture in the room. Nor did he need any. His mind went back time and again to the strange events of his life, in which he saw the hand of Providence, and this, the fact that he had been housed in the rooms of a priest of Witchilopochtli, was in his eyes one of them.

As he sat there, facing the window, he felt a presence behind him. A dusky light floated like dust about the room. He turned round. A Mexican warrior in all his superb regalia was standing erect and fierce in front of him. On his head his black hair rose defiantly in a vertical stiff tuft, from which hung the heavy feather-gear of the brave. He wore the mantle of those who have sworn not to recede before twenty enemies; two white suns on a yellow background. From his lower lip hung a long ornament of gold which reached down to his chest.

"Long Face!" called Alonso in Spanish, "who is this man? Why did you——" Long Face ran in and smiled. "Don't you recognise him, sir?" Alonso did not recognise the visitor, for such is the power of social disguise. The warrior spoke. "I am Ixcawatzin." Alonso recognised the voice and gradually also the features of Ixcawatzin, so strangely altered by his head-dress and the deformation

inflicted on his lower lip by the golden stick hanging from it. Long Face withdrew, impressed by Ixcawatzin's clothes which made him recede into his own obscure rank.

"Don Alonso," Ixcawatzin began (he had asked Long Face to instruct him as to the correct way to address the Spaniard): "I have been restored by the emperor to my privileges and rank. Now, I can reveal to you that I had been caught a prisoner only because I had been betrayed by my two seconds in command. They have paid with their lives. As soon as I was restored to my former position, I thought it my duty to see you. For now what you have done for me takes on a quite different significance. Now, yes, but not till now, it is true to say that you have saved my life!"

The knightly spirit of the Spaniard was aroused. Not for a moment did he think of thrusting his own rights and interests across the path of the Mexican's dramatic destiny. He might have objected that the Tlaxcatecs had given him Ixcawatzin, who therefore was his slave. He did not even have to brush aside this thought, for it did not occur to him. He was fascinated by the pageantry of it all; by the sudden transfiguration of the depressed slave, ready to die on any sacrificial stone, into a proud warrior fully two inches taller, straight-eyed, full-chested and gloriously clad. His joy was genuine. He sprang to his feet.

"I am so glad! I wish you all happiness in your new life!" It was simply said and deeply meant. Ixcawatzin's face was unmoved. Not an eyelash quivered in his eyes, slightly painted round the eyelids. "There is one thing I wish to let you know," he said, with a voice held tight and monotonous by some hidden effort, "Xuchitzin"—Alonso blushed like a girl—"is the daughter of our great King Nezawal Pilli, now dead, who was my mother's brother." Ixcawatzin waited for a brief instant to let the fact sink in. "Her father, on the point of death, entrusted her care to me. I have no other end in life but to see that no harm is done to her."

"Has she no brother?" asked Alonso. He knew she had three and he had in fact already met King Cacama with whom he had to discuss a number of political matters, and Vanilla-Face, the turbulent revolutionist of Tetzcuco. But his question was purely tactical, just to give himself time to reflect and to find out exactly what was in Ixcawatzin's mind. "Her brothers, the present kind and . . . others, are far too intent on their own affairs to trouble about their sister. Xuchitl has no other guardian but me," retorted Ixcawatzin. He was as rigid as when he had entered the room, and spoke stiffly.

There was a silence. Alonso was not quite clear as to the purpose of Ixcawatzin's statement. He reacted with the candour of a man who feels safe in the purity of his intentions. "I am then twice glad that you are your full self again. For your sake and for hers. You may be

certain that if ever you need my help to protect her, you will not be disappointed."

There was another silence which Ixcawatzin broke at last: "But, suppose the danger . . . came from you?" Alonso's first impulse was to break the rigid, stiff figure in front of him with a violent punch on his face. He actually felt the muscular wave rising in his right arm and his fist clenched itself of its own accord. Then, the smiling, ironic face of Hernán Cortés rose in his memory to calm his fury. "Danger from me? Watch your words, Ixcawatzin, and do not tax my patience."

Ixcawatzin remained stiff, perfectly self-mastered, cold. "You must be patient . . . just as I am. You must understand my difficulty. I have sworn to watch over Xuchitl; and I owe you my life. If danger came to Xuchitl from you, I would have either to break my oath or to break my bond to you. I ask you a promise not to put me in that situation till I have released myself of my bond to you . . . for instance, by saving your life."

Alonso was furious. "Enough of this. I am not a man to endanger any woman's life." "There are things more precious than life in a woman," retorted Ixcawatzin. "Ixcawatzin!" Alonso's voice rang clear and commanding. "You are calling me a thief!" "Do I take it," asked Ixcawatzin without a gesture, without even a modulation in his voice, "that you will never take from Xuchitl but what she will freely give?" "Do I take it that you think it necessary to ask me such a question?" asked Alonso, stiff and rigid also. Then, suddenly, the whole scene appealed to him as absurd. His voice changed. "Look here," he expostulated in a friendly tone, "you must try to understand me. I also have a bond towards you. Do you think it is fair that you should be provoking me to anger when I know that you are not free to defend yourself if I struck you?" For the first time, Ixcawatzin wavered. He altered his stand. His face remained unmoved. Alonso went on: "I assure you there is no danger for Xuchitl. I tell you so precisely because you are unarmed against me, otherwise I would not have mentioned her name, nor even allowed——" He cut himself short, then went on: "I am glad that such an upright and brave soldier is to guard her, and glad you are free and proud again. Do not ask for more. As for her danger," he added, "let me tell you that henceforth she will be guarded by my men." Alonso had set a guard of his own native auxiliaries to command the approaches to the lonely princess, lest Cacama came back still unrepentant and, intent on sacrificing her.

Ixcawatzin knew his case was slender. He knew he had stretched the terms of his mandate beyond what King Nezawal Pilli's last words to him warranted. He knew that Xuchitl's whole attitude sufficed tooust him out of her life altogether. He struggled with himself for a

few seconds, then said : " Farewell, Don Alonso. You are a brave man. I am sure you will soon give me an opportunity to free myself from my bond by saving your life." And he went away, outwardly straight as a pole, inwardly in ruins.

8

Hardly had Ixcawatzin left the room than Alonso heard a strange music of shrill whistles. Long Face came to explain : " They are taking the hay-wheels to the lagoon to wash them for to-morrow's sacrifice." " Let us go out and see," said Alonso. On the way Long-Face explained in Spanish that in the month of Tepetlhuil (High Mountains) a special festivity was consecrated to the deities who live on the mountain tops, for if they were not placated they were apt to send down all kinds of diseases on negligent mortals. In every household hay-wheels or rings were kept hanging from the beams the whole year round, waiting to be used in this particular month. The first thing to do was to have them washed clean. All the neighbours of the district got together and took their hay-rings to the lagoon, in a gay procession preceded by improvised musicians who played on whistles made of earthenware or shells. Alonso and Long Face saw one of these processions as it came down a steep street towards the lake. No trace of a priest. A strictly popular affair. A group of young whistlers dancing gaily to their own tunes preceded the men who carried each his own family ring. A few of them carried a slice of *ocotl* burning as a torch to guide their steps, for the moon was not yet out. Alonso and Long Face waited in the dark to let the procession pass, and, as they went by, Alonso overheard the words *Xuchitl*, *Techcatl*. He grew tense like a hound that has scented the game. *Xuchitl*, *Techcatl*. This second word meant *the sacrificial stone*. More groups came down the street and again he heard *Xuchitl*, *Techcatl*. He turned to Long Face, who smiled, serene and unconcerned. " What are they all talking about ? " he asked. He was not sure enough that he had understood them. " They are talking about to-morrow's sacrifices. The victims are five ; four women and a man." This was not precisely reassuring, yet there was safety in numbers, thought Alonso, and the Tetzcućans were not likely to sacrifice one of their princesses in a group of other common victims. " But . . . why do they repeat *Xuchitl*-*Techcatl* ? " And as he asked this question, a man who passed by them mentioned the two words together : " *Xuchitltechcatl*." Long-Face was unperturbed. " That is one of the four women. The victims are given special names and one of them is known as ' the flower of the sacrificial stone.' " " Ah ! " sighed Alonso.

Withal he was seized with a peculiar anxiety for the safety of Xuchitl. "Are we going down to the lake?" asked Long Face. "Yes," he agreed, after a brief hesitation. They followed the crowd. Some of the parties were already returning, with their hay-rings clean, dripping fresh water on the way; others were gathered in the edge of the lagoon and with brooms improvised out of green leaves, were refreshing their hay-rings and removing the dust gathered on them during the whole year. The moon was just rising and it bathed the scene in its cold light.

"Let us go home by the royal gardens," said Alonso with a perfect imitation of indifference. It was not much out of the way, and the night was pleasant. Long Face, moreover, knew that all Spanish chiefs took upon themselves to watch over their own sentinels. He was not surprised that Alonso wanted to see whether those whom he had set to watch over Xuchitl's safety were performing their duty. Alonso meandered about the gardens which King Nezawal Pilli had planted, and visited all the spots where he had put his Cempoalese sentinels. He challenged them all and found them at their posts.

There was a light shining in Xuchitl's window. "It is a pity," he thought, "that I am not free to run in for a while and talk to her." He felt tempted as he had never been in his life. "Are you sure," he asked Long Face, "that you are right about to-morrow and that . . . she runs no risk?" Of course he was. So was Alonso himself, and he hardly listened to Long Face's protestations.

They walked out of the royal grounds and, on their way home, saw families preparing their "hills" for the next day. With stems of wild amaranth they covered the hay-rings, making a kind of figure with a man's face at one end and a snake's head at the other. The man's face was smeared with molten rubber and adorned with flat cakes of yellow amaranth stuck on both cheeks. The whole image was laid on a bed of reeds.

Alonso felt a deep repulsion for all these forms of worship. He remembered the simple, fragrant festivities of his native Spain, the solemn music in the morning twilight under the shadowy walls of the church, facing the glorious light of hundreds of candles; or again the melodious strains of the popular guitar, flowing in the moonlit streets. How could such a creature as Xuchitl have grown in the bosom of this thorny, bleeding religion? And a voice in him answered with another question: "How could the Boar have been born in the bosom of the religion of Christ?" Yet, there was no doubt in his mind that both were exceptions and that, while the word of Christ had yet much to do in Spain, it had everything to do in Mexico.

He went to sleep with a doubt in his heart—one he hardly dared formulate. "Would Xuchitl herself carry all that black superstition

in her soul?" He knew how little Long-Face had changed after months of talks on God and his angels and even after Alonso himself, in the hope of drawing the grace of God upon his neophyte, had baptized him without waiting for a priest. This mystery tortured him. Was God's light coming from above strong enough to beat nature's light coming from within? Were they the same, or mutually indifferent, or antagonistic? And if they were the same, where did these Mexicans draw their inner light from, so dark and sanguinary, and yet a light, however sinister?

He went to sleep in this state of mind. The riddle. The constant riddle, one of the forms—though he knew it not—of the tension between his staunch and simple faith and his keen, questioning mind, in its turn, the outcome of his mixed blood. His inner being was like a meeting-hall for his four races: the Hispano-Roman, the Visigothic, the Moorish and the Jewish, constantly debating in the underground hall of his self, open to northern, southern, eastern and western lights which struck all objects with different, now conflicting, now harmonizing rays. And as his own individual light was dimmed by sleep, he fell under the sway of his ancestors, at sixes and sevens on everything which his experience referred to them, so that in his sleep he felt pulled this way and that like a mariner at sea by winds and currents.

9

He woke up late. The sun flooded his room. A strange chant filled the adjoining streets. "What is that?" he asked Long Face. "They are singing in the teocalli-yard. The procession will be out soon." He remembered that the festivities in honour of the mountain deities were due. He dressed and breakfasted quickly and went out to watch the procession. On their way they saw several humble houses where the "hills" had been served with the ritual stews of hen and dog, and were being incensed with an earthenware spoon full of burning copal. Alonso stood gazing at the weird ceremonies till he began to wonder whether it was wise for him to appear in public. "Is there a place from which we could see the rites without being seen?" he asked. Long Face took him to a terrace within their own teocalli. Alonso thought it wiser from every point of view. He still remembered how, with his mere presence he had put to flight the priests who—By the way, what were the priests doing there? He had not yet inquired about it. The revelation of Xuchitl's actual existence had filled his soul so completely that it had driven out of it every other subject for his curiosity. Yet, he must find out what those sinister priests were after when—The chant seemed now to flow near them.

It was low and monotonous enough, with none but manly voices in its flow ; yet, now and then, a wave of imprecation seemed to rise, only to fall again below the normal level into a trough of imploration, then the flow returned again to its normal monotone. A row of black-robed priests came first, singing, with solemn faces and slow, even steps. Then came a litter borne shoulder-high by four women clad in embroidered grey huipils, their faces elaborately painted grey and yellow. In the litter sat Tepoxch, or Soft-Stone, the first woman-victim. She was a young woman, wearing a paper-crown, dressed in a huipil of the same colour as that of her four carriers but more elaborately embroidered. Her eyes seemed to be struck by some kind of paralysing terror. A second litter followed, carried in similar fashion by four women clad in green huipils. In the litter sat Matlalquac, or Green-Head, the second woman-victim, dressed in green and wearing a green paper-crown. She was also young and her eyes poured tears which she let fall down her cheeks. Her hands rested on her knees like two dead birds. The third litter was carried by men wearing no clothes but a luxurious maxtlatl or loincloth made of green cotton and covered with garlands of flowers. In the litter sat the third woman-victim, Xuchitl-Techcatl or Flower-Sacrificial Stone. She was dressed in a black huipil and wore a tiara of paper-flowers dotted all over with drops of melted rubber. She was a beautiful young woman, hard, set, brave and as one could see, determined not to yield to self-pity. Then, always within the monotonous flow of the religious chant, came the fourth and last woman-victim, Mayavel, or God-Thrower, the symbol of the generous maguey, provider of food, drink and house-building materials for the Aztecs. She sat in a litter carried by four men wearing maxtlatls made of maguey-palm leaves and was herself dressed with maguey leaves. She seemed older than her three companions, although still young, and when she passed under Alonso's moved eyes, she was hiding her face in her hands. The procession was closed by the man-victim Milnauatl, or Fine-Estate, who on that day represented the world of snakes. The four posts of his litter were carved in the shape of snakes. The four women carriers were clad in yellowish-green huipils decorated with snakes. He himself wore a paper-crown of the same colour, dotted with drops of melted rubber. He was naked but for his loincloth which imitated the tortuous twists of a reptile.

The procession went by, gruesome and lugubrious. Alonso turned to Long Face and asked : "What happens now ?" Long Face was going to explain, but changed his mind. "I am thinking . . . if we went round by the old king's garden and entered the teocalli from behind, we could be in time for the . . . rest and we could see it from the chief priest's terrace. No one can see us. They will all be busy." They hurried through out-of-the-way, empty streets, and presently

found themselves on a terrace which, although sideways, commanded a fairly good view of the top platform and the front steps of the teocalli.

One by one the victims arrived at the foot of the steps, and by dint of patience, the carriers performed the no mean feat of lifting them in their litters, step by step to the top. There, the priests took hold of them, laid them on the stone and in the usual way offered their panting hearts to the gods. The bodies were then rolled down the steps, carefully so that they did not get bruised or broken. "Why are they so careful?" asked Alonso, who followed these scenes with horror in his heart. "Because to-morrow is the day of Texinilo." "I don't understand," said Alonso. "Ah, of course, you don't know. To-morrow in every quarter of the town, they celebrate the fact that they have provided one of those victims." "And then?" "Well, of course, they eat their own victims. See that man there, who is cutting off the head of Xuchitl-Techcatl." Alonso shivered. "What is he doing now? I cannot see." Long Face did not even need to look in order to explain: "He is hammering the pole through the head. They pass that pole through the four heads, through the temples, and then take it all away to the teocalli, Stone-of-Heads, they call it. Now those three men you see there, wearing loincloths of the same colour . . . they are the delegates of the district which has provided the victim to act for Xuchitl-Techcatl. They will take the body to their district and will distribute bits to as many households as possible for them to eat."

10

This ceremony left Alonso in a state of almost unbearable anguish and tension. His questioning mind turned constantly to God. "Is it possible, oh Lord?" he asked in his heart. "Can men err so sadly seeking to honour Thee?" For in his heart of hearts, he felt neither enmity nor contempt nor repulsion towards those people nor even towards their priests who understood divine worship in such infamous fashion—nothing but pity. How, then, had they gone astray and sunk into such abysses, since they had been created by the only One creative Hand there is?

It was fortunate for him that events were happening under his eyes which forced him to turn his attention away from his desolate meditation. He had placed a skilfully contrived net of observers and spies in Tetzcuco, Tacuba and other strategic spots in the valley of the two lagoons. Some of them came that morning to report that numerous battalions of Mexicans had left for the passes to meet Cortés. Alonso spent the whole day making arrangements to find out Moteczuma's

exact intention and how best to communicate with his chief about this new development, for Cortés had every right to expect a friendly or, at any rate, a peaceful reception, to judge by the latest messages Moteczima had sent him.

When night fell again, Alonso felt his anguish return to his heart. This time it had taken a new form and was definitely set on Xuchitl's fate. The fact that one of the victims of that atrocious ceremony was known as Xuchitl-Techcatl was preying on his mind in a wholly irrational way, for the association of the two words brought about an association of the two ideas and made him suffer acutely. He felt as if Xuchitl, "his" Xuchitl, were still mixed up with all that sanguinary cult, part of it, loyal to it perhaps? . . . A faithful believer in it? . . . No. He rejected the idea with all the force of his loving heart. But all the same, enough doubt remained in the dregs of his thought to fill him with impatience, to add to the impatience he already felt on other grounds to see Xuchitl converted to the law and faith of Christ.

He made up his mind to go and see Xuchitl at once. Yes. He had promised himself not to see her, for she was a threat to his vow. But he must. He would be strong and keep his vow till Father Olmedo told him what he was to do about it. But no fear of being weak could prevail against the appalling thought that Xuchitl was still in the hell of that sanguinary abomination. As soon as his own pleading had carried his mind to his will's foregone conclusion, his hurry knew no bounds. Every minute wasted on his way might bring Xuchitl to the murderous stone. Presently he found he was actually running. "Well!" he muttered to himself. "Calm. More calm." He was alone in one of the leafy avenues of the park. A shadow in the distance—no doubt a sentinel—did not budge. Alonso went on. "And yet," thought part of himself, "there is no sentinel there. I should return and see." But his other self hurried forward. And his first self went on: "It looked rather a dignified shadow for a sentinel." But his second self hurried forward.

II

Xuchitl was sitting on some cushions on the floor. A long cotton picture-record was spread out on her knees. Behind her a pine-torch was burning on a pillar of copper. "Oh!" she cried out. Her delight knew no bounds. "But . . . what is it?" she asked at once. Alonso's face had frightened her. He knelt before her. He was wearing no armour. He had on a light antelope jacket and a low cotton shirt which allowed his neck complete freedom. He wore

neither hat nor helmet. He took her hands in his and kissed them. "I could not help it. I had to come and see you!" he said, excusing himself in his own eyes. She did not understand. "But . . . why not?" Alonso realised how absurd his remark had been. "I had promised myself not to see you again till . . . It is rather long and difficult to explain. I did not want to . . . love you too much . . . too soon . . ." She smiled, on the whole rather pleased than displeased at the enigma. He looked straight into her eyes with his, which still gave her a feeling of intensity—used as she was to denser colours—and said: "I want you to help me to keep . . . my promise to myself." Her eyes quivered ever so slightly. "But," she smiled with just a trace of maliciousness, "why *had* you to come?" His features took on again that anguished expression which had frightened her. "Xuchitl, oh Xuchitl! I have seen the festivities of the month!" She grew sad. "Let me see. Which month is it?" She knew they were all equally gruesome, whatever the month; but he noticed with deep thankfulness that she did not appear to follow closely the calendar of religious rites of the country. "Ah yes! The High Mountains! Wretched things!" She pointed to the book displayed on her knees. "Here, in this book, my father had explained their origin. He has left a complete record of the birth of all these bloody rites." Alonso's voice trembled as he asked, "Did he . . . believe in them?" The light in her eyes was enough to ease his mind. "This was his way of educating our people out of them, by showing how it had all begun and what it meant and that there was a time when these rites had not been known." He looked a different man. "You seem happier now," she asked. "Yes. I was afraid, terribly afraid lest . . . Tell me, your father must have been an outstanding man?" Her eyes took on a dreamy air. "He knew many things unknown to the crowd. Some he found in nature; but most he discovered in his heart. . . . He knew you were coming." They remained in silence for a while, looking into each other's eyes.

"Are all your men like you?" she asked. "I mean, blue-eyed and golden-haired?" He blushed. He could not help it. He always blushed when he heard the word "gold," and the idea that it was applied to his own hair humiliated him. "Some are black-haired and black-eyed," he answered. "Of course, I remember the man who arrived with you in that big canoe was like that." He wondered again at this premonition Xuchitl had had. It reminded him of his purpose. "You know what became of him? He was turned into a god by a Totonac tribe." She did not react at all. She seemed to take it as a matter of course. "Strange, isn't it?" he asked. And she: "Don't you turn men into gods?" The Aztec language does not discriminate between "gods" and "saints." He was somewhat put out and did not know how to answer; but at last his mind rose in triumph: "We

have turned God into a man." She was struck by the unexpected answer. "Oh! How did it happen?"

He closed his eyes for an instant, indrawn. Then he spoke: "God is only One. And he is Love. He made us out of love, and out of love, made us free; and out of love, He suffered to see the sorrows which we make for ourselves the moment we are free. So, to save us from utter destruction, he decided to have a Son and to send Him amongst us to live the life of a man." She drank his words with a face which expectancy and faith made girlish. "He was born of a Virgin in a humble village very far away from here. He taught love to those who thought at best of justice and expediency. And he was sentenced to death. And he died on a Cross. Like this," he said, pointing with his finger to a picture in Xuchitl's book where a Cross could be seen on a hill. "What is it?" he asked. "This is the cross of Quetzalcoatl," she answered. "My father knew it. My father thought that Quetzalcoatl was a priest of your religion who had come here long ago. And that is why he was sure that you would come back." She spoke with a slightly husky voice, struggling against the tears which she felt welling up in her. "Alonso, could I . . . could I be admitted into your beautiful faith?" He had let go her hands. He was kneeling in the same posture in which he had fallen on his arrival. His hands were resting on his legs. He felt a strong impulse to open his arms wide, as in the Crucifix, for such was the visual suggestion which drove him, and then to close them again tight with the beloved Aztec flower imprisoned in them . . . but he struggled and won. He remained motionless, and with a voice warmer by all the love he had not thrown round her, he answered: "He died for you as He died for me and His arms are open to receive you."

She burst into tears of joy and her face fell first on her hands, then on his knees. Felicity! The soul delivered at last from the thralldom of the blood! Those lonely years harbouring doubts and feeling a repulsion which had driven her to the wilderness and cut her off from all companionship, those years without earth or roots, without light from Heaven, without foliage—gone. Vanished. Now, she was at last a human being amongst human beings and—deepest of all joys—she had there, under her weary but happy head a man in whose soul she was at home. Through him she felt now in communion with an immense world, with a world, in fact, without limits. From his very first words: "God is only One," he had shaken off the nightmare of the grinning gods, whose multiplicity of repulsive and cruel faces and figures had oppressed her all her life. How clear, how free life was now. God was that spirit which she had seen in Alonso's first glance and which she had guessed in every lovely thing of life—flowers, sunrises and sunsets and the haunting smile of the lagoons and the

emotion Little Sparrow used to raise in her, and . . . yes, in the bliss she was then feeling as her head lay on his knees in utter abandon. That Son of God killed by the men He came to save ! How his mother must have suffered ! " I should like to have known her ! " she said, and this time she spoke aloud. He lifted her head with his hands. " Here. " He undid the medal round his neck and showed her the image of the Virgin and Child. " Oh ! " she cried out, " is that her portrait ? " He said " Yes " with his eyelids. She was holding the medal in her hands, looking at the image of the Child which made her think of Little Sparrow, and imitating the smile of the Virgin with her own sweet smile which she had inherited from her mother, the Mexican princess. " My mother gave me that medal. She always wore it herself, " he said. The silver chain hung from her hands. Alonso undid the hook, took the two ends in his hands, passed his arms round her neck and clasped the chain. Xuchitl realised what he was doing. She let go the medal, and the Mother and Child fell on the Heart of Jade.

She seized the golden chain and passed it over her head. " What is it ? " asked Alonso. " A heart. It belonged to my father and to my grandfather. " Alonso was observing the jewel with curious and admiring eyes. She was holding the chain in her hand. " Put it round your neck, " she begged. He did so. Then she was seized with fear lest the stone, with its magic powers, should make him break his promise. In vain did her new faith tell her that he would win against such sorileges. She remained impressed by the power of the Heart of Jade. She dreaded his sorrow if he came to fail. " Alonso, " she forced herself to say, " it is late ; you ought to go now. " Mere words, yet clear to him in their inner meaning. They meant : " You asked me to help you. And as I love you, I ask you to go. "

He took her hands in his and went away happy—happier than he had ever felt in his life.

12

He went to sleep at peace with himself. He had had a good day as a soldier, as a Christian and as a man. He had conquered one of the most lovable souls outside Christendom for the law of Christ. And he knew the bliss of love. The soft weight of the Heart of Jade on his chest reminded him of the tender and bright creature in whose breast his medal of the Mother and Child was now nesting. The sleep into which he glided was like a quiet, limpid, subterranean lake.

But as soon as he let the boat go adrift on the waters of that lake of sleep, a violent storm began to rage. The manly desires which he

had kept in check so many years suddenly revolted and assaulted his being with a riot of sensuous and obscene images, partly rememorated, partly built up in his imagination with the most vivid colours, the swiftest movements and a wealth of lived detail which made his senses ache, his mind suffer torment, his soul sicken with shame. It was a torrent of persons, scenes, acts, Spanish, Mexican, living, dead, known, unknown, in a tumultuous disorder, in an uninterrupted orgy and debauchery of nymphs and satyrs yielding in lawless thralldom to the sovereign power of the flesh.

Alonso turned in his bed this way and that, moaning miserably. In his dream he struggled to keep the image of Xuchitl away from that hell of infamy into which he had fallen ; but Xuchitl's image returned and returned again and even entered into the infamous game or tried to, unless it was he who was trying to possess her in his dream, driving away all the other monsters to keep her close by his side as his own quiet, unique, secret wife whom he was going to enjoy when suddenly a vigorous reaction of his sense of honour drove her away and he was again plunged into the obscene cataract of nymphs and satyrs vomited in the night by a huge Cardinal, a satyr himself chasing the nymphs, all whores like hens, and Marta walking in the wood with her body open before him like a bleeding hen devoured by a falcon while Antonio swore at the boy and at Marta and the Boar turned into a he-goat and fled on seeing Alonso in the dark forest.

His blood beat hard in his heart and temples and at the back of his head. He woke up. No. He could not wait any longer. The Cardinal must forgive him. (He was dead anyhow !) He had kept his promise for so long—nearly ten years—more than can be expected of a man ; and Xuchitl was a Christian now in all but name, and he meant to marry her. Why should he wait ? And in any case, he could wait no longer. It was not a matter of choice. He simply could not and would not.

He rose from bed and dressed in the dark. He wondered whether he should put his coat of armour on. It was safer. But the night was so hot ! He decided on a middle course. He put his armour on but did not clasp it. He slipped away, while Long Face, in the room next to his, slept peacefully. He rushed through the dark streets towards Xuchitl.

As the moist air of the lagoon bathed his face with the coolness of the night, his ardour abated enough to allow a return of his thinking powers. " Why ! " said his mind. " What folly ! Whither are you running ? What will you say to that girl in love ? How will you explain your return, your defeat ? " But he would not listen to his mind. His ardour was still burning and, though no longer in unique possession of his being, was still stronger by far than his mind. He

pretended not to hear what his mind had to say and hurried on as if he were still impelled by the irresistible impulse which had been driving him earlier in the night, whereas now he was driving himself forward as well as being driven. On he went, obsessed, possessed by a violent return of his pent-up desires which had at last found their object.

He hardly saw the sentinels, who recognised him and let him pass unchallenged, and so he sank into the dark leafy avenues of the royal park which led to Xuchitl.

13

Ixcawatzin had left Alonso's quarters in a deep turmoil. He felt he was losing his grip—perhaps he had lost it already—over a situation which he had never fully either mastered or let go. The key-fact, that which time and again came up to the level of his conscious mind, till he drove it down again below the surface, was that scene in the courtyard of the royal palace when Alonso, with him and with Long Face, had appeared suddenly and Xuchitl had run to Alonso's arms as a bird flying to its nest. Xuchitl had never seen Alonso. Like all his countrymen, and indeed like all the men of his time in the Old as in the New World, Ixcawatzin was ready to accept as plain matter of fact many an event which we would deem marvellous, miraculous or mysterious. This sudden recognition of Alonso by Xuchitl was the root-fact which tortured Ixcawatzin. It had sapped a hidden faith in hidden possibilities which he had never owned, yet which had nourished the very roots of his life.

He was so distracted and distressed that he dared not appear before Xuchitl whom he had not seen since his return from slavery ; and yet he could not keep away from her. The day after his visit to Alonso—the day Alonso himself had spent under the stress of the sacrifices to the High Mountain deities—Ixcawatzin went through severe religious exercises in order to master his distress. He bled himself freely and offered the blood to Quetzalcoatl, his favourite deity, whom, of course, he understood in the orthodox sense. But, to his profound grief, the night came and he had made no progress. That hidden string in his heart, which despite his endeavours, tied him to Xuchitl, pulled as hard as ever and at last forced him to leave the Calmecac and to roam aimlessly in the royal gardens. There, now under Xuchitl's window, now far away, now by the edge of a pool, now under a leafy tree, resting his weary mind and his bleeding body, the soldier-priest wandered in the night, unable to rest, to sleep, to go, to stay, in the hopeless hell of the undecided and of the unavowed.

How long had he been there? His eyes had closed, as he leant on the trunk of one of the majestic trees of the finest garden in Tetzcuco, when—asleep or awake; he did not know for certain—he heard the characteristic noise of the phantasm whose chest is open and clatters as he walks. Ixcawatzin knew it well, for he had already fought with that phantasm, whom only the boldest warriors dare meet; and he had even extracted from him the four maguey-thorns which were the very acme of human victory against such apparitions. Clap, clap, he heard in the night. The phantasm approached. The night was dark, darker still under the wide canopy of that leafy tree; yet Ixcawatzin saw the phantasm stalking across a less dark space between two trees, with steps which seemed to him gigantic. He was not put out. He knew what to do. He had already won the four thorns once. This time, he would go straight for his heart. There he was. The sides of the phantasm's chest were open. He could see them hanging from the shoulder and moving in rhythm with the phantasm's steps. Ixcawatzin timed his leap carefully, his eyes set on the opening where he would presently drive his bold, merciless hand. Suddenly, he sprang forward, fell on the phantasm, plunged his hand under the flapping chest-wall—how cold and hard it was!—and grasped something. . . . His heart, oh glory! . . . Ixcawatzin pulled hard. The phantasm's hand was grasping his left arm. He ducked, side-stepped and ran into the night, holding in his feverish hand the heart of the dreaded ghost.

He ran till he came within range of the sentinel at the back door. They all knew him. He stopped, calmed himself, at any rate outwardly, and passed by the honest Cempoalese with a quiet, dignified step. Free again, he fell back into his turmoil. He knew the surest way to destroy his priceless possession was to look at it before the next morning. He arrived in his cell, in the dark, found some holy paper, dropped the phantasm's heart on it and folded the paper over it. Then, exhausted, he dropped like a log on his hard bed.

14

Alonso steadied himself, looked round and thought: "Had I not seized his arm, I might have believed he was a ghost!" He felt a slight scratch at the back of the neck. He touched the spot and rubbed it up and down. "Where is the chain?" He searched his chest. The Heart of Jade had disappeared. So had his tension of mind and body. He found himself cool, self-possessed, in Xuchitl's gardens well after midnight, with no object which he could explain intelligibly to any

one, and having lost—to whom?—the precious heirloom which Xuchitl had given him in token of her love.

He retraced his steps, slowly, in a meditative mood. "To whom?" he repeated inwardly. He was not examining the matter as a police magistrate would; he was just sensing it, feeling it in the night, in the very air in which it had occurred. And the air and the night whispered into his ear: "To Ixcawatzin!" "Of course," he answered to the air and the night. "You are right. Who else could it be?" He had had a scene with him which in his eyes was the outcome of jealousy. Alonso therefore simplified the event, reducing it to the feeling of jealousy which no doubt underlay it, but he was unable to see the rich superstructure of life and legend which covered it, and gave it so many subtle and complex features.

Ixcawatzin was jealous. He was in love with Xuchitl. He was longing to be freed from the thralldom of owing his life and honour to Alonso, in order to meet him on equal terms when the personal issue came to be raised. Alonso could understand all that. There was nothing in it to worry him. Xuchitl loved him. He loved Xuchitl. Ixcawatzin would not be the first man—not the last—to be crossed in love. Every man must face his destiny. No man need answer for his fellows. One point did not seem to Alonso quite up to Ixcawatzin's upright ways. The noble Mexican should not have attacked him at all, in any circumstances whatsoever—least of all at night, without warning, and run away as he had done after his theft. Alonso walked on, reconstituting the strange scene in his mind, puzzled at Ixcawatzin's behaviour, for he held him in high esteem. Suddenly he stopped, as if he had seen something in front of him. He was close to his own door. He could hear Long Face's snores through the open window. A curtain of matting edged with heavy wood, was knocking at regular intervals on the window-frame. "Yes. That must be it. I remember Long Face telling me one night of that curious superstition. The phantasm with the chest open. The regular noise of his sides clapping as he walks. . . ." He put his hand on his armour, which hung from his shoulder. "Yes. And of course, the heart! And Ixcawatzin himself, didn't he swear to me on our way down from the Sierra that he had had a fight once with one of these phantasms?" He stood musing before his door. "Either that or he is a low slave." And he went in.

•

15

As soon as the sun flooded his cell, Ixcawatzin sprang to his feet, rushed to the mat on which he had left his treasure and—he did not have to uncover it. The wind had blown open the paper and his bewildered eyes beheld the Heart of Jade. He stood for a time staring at it, stunned. Then, a doubt arose in his mind. Was it *the* Heart of Jade? It certainly looked like the jewel Ixcawatzin knew well. But was it identical with it, the very Heart of Jade he had seen bleeding on King Nezawal Pilli's chest, the one he had picked up from the ashes at the foot of Nezawal Pilli's funeral pyre? He stood staring at it at a distance, in a posture of fear, with his hands and arms hanging slightly backwards as if his whole body said: "No. I do not want to touch you!" He stooped and began to examine it more carefully. The fact was that he did not know it well enough to decide: he was beginning to lose his fear, in fact to feel drawn to the jewel; and without as yet touching it, he knelt down to be closer to it and bent over till his eyes were close to it. . . . And his nose too. Suddenly, an overpowering feeling of Xuchitl's presence came over him, as if Xuchitl were actually in his cell. It was her scent. Ixcawatzin realised it. The Heart of Jade was impregnated with Xuchitl's own scent. He trembled all over, seized the jewel in his hands, took it to his lips—but no! He did not yield. He laid it back on the holy paper.

He had not fought with a phantasm. He had fought with Alonso. No. He had not fought at all. He had stolen a jewel from a passer-by in the dark. Alonso would now be thinking that an ordinary thief had assaulted him and had run away like a coward—with his ill-gotten booty. He hid his head in his hands. And it was round his neck! . . . The priceless jewel, the love-jewel, the token of intimate bliss was dangling on Alonso's heart! Alonso was the heir to the love tradition of the royal house of Tetzcuco through the sovereign will of Xuchitl. There was nothing left for him but to bow to destiny—and die.

16

Ixcawatzin entered Xuchitl's room with a proud mien. Xuchitl knew the circumstances of his return to honour and freedom, and had been expecting his visit. She was going to congratulate him when she read on his face that something grave was in his mind, and she waited.

"Xuchitl, where is your Heart of Jade?" His right hand was tightly closed, firm at the end of his rigid arm. He tried to be as

cold as he could, but she perceived the trepidation in his voice. She was not expecting such a question. "Why do you want to know to-day rather than any other day?" she asked, just to ward off the attack and prepare the defence. "You will soon know. But meanwhile, tell me, if you can take me into your confidence, where is the Heart of Jade?"

"Alonso is wearing it now," she answered simply.

He stood the stab like a man.

"You will remember that your father asked me to watch over you. Let me ask: Have you given . . . him the Heart of Jade as you would have given him any other jewel, or——"

She smiled. "Why ask? Don't you see that the Heart of Jade is a talisman of love? I gave him the Heart of Jade when I gave him my own heart."

There he stood, straight and motionless, with a terrific pressure on the pit of his stomach, his throat parched with fever. He tried to swallow once or twice before speaking again. "His . . . wife, then?"

"Not till I have been received into his faith." She spoke as one who answers a request for information, yet realising how she was hurting him.

"Here is the Heart of Jade," he said, and he opened his hand like a tray under her astonished eyes. "I met him last night in the dark. I thought he was the phantasm with open sides——" He stopped dead. A sixth sense told him that she did not believe in such a phantasm and for the first time in his life a whiff of doubt penetrated the well-walled teocalli of his face.

Xuchitl was smiling over his head. Alonso entered the room. He saw she had the Heart of Jade in her hand. He saw Ixcawatzin. He spoke first. "I guessed it all. It could only be Ixcawatzin. And he is too brave and honourable to rob me and to run away from me. So I concluded that he took me for the phantasm with open sides."

Ixcawatzin's humiliation was complete. He had been even excused and forgiven. The White Man and his Mexican wife had passed judgment on him and absolved him. "Xuchitl," he said, "your father would now think that my services are no longer required. You have now someone capable of watching over you better than I. But your father made me promise that I would do nothing against your desires. I ask you: will you release me from the duties your father laid on me?"

She was moved. "I shall never forget your devotion!"

"Very well," he said. "You do release me!"

She agreed with a movement of her head. He was moving to go: "Ixcawatzin," broke in Alonso, "two words. First, time is coming when there may be . . . difficulties between our two peoples. Remember,

I am your friend. And . . . let me release you also. I hold you free from any gratitude."

Ixcawatzin looked coldly and proudly at the Spaniard : " No one can release me but myself—and the gods."

And he walked out without looking back.

17

This episode strengthened Alonso against temptation and enabled him to frequent Xuchitl without too great a struggle. Instinctively he managed to lead their conversation into spiritual channels, to which she was inclined by nature and by upbringing. He was so familiar with the Gospels that he was able to relate the life of Jesus to her almost in the actual words of the Evangelists. These days in Tetzcuco, either in her rooms or in her father's luxuriant gardens, while he unfolded before her the most moving story the world possesses, filled him with the purest and deepest joys. The life of the Saviour was new to her in a much profounder sense than it would have been to any Old-World person hearing it for the first time, for it revealed to her an entirely novel and astonishing view of the world in the vivid and telling guise of a life actually lived. And what a life ! Xuchitl responded to the beauty, the depth, the simplicity of Christ's words and actions with every fibre of her sensitive soul. Alonso himself, who felt Christ's life so intensely and who loved Xuchitl so deeply, unfolded his narrative with the utmost skill and dramatic vigour ; so that the unforgettable episodes succeeded each other like pearls on the golden string of the divine personality, and Xuchitl went from wonder to wonder and from emotion to emotion.

She could not, of course, forget the background of her own religion, and at every step she was led to compare the infallible wisdom of Christ's love with the appalling cruelty of the grinning gods. So that when the divine Life came to a close on this earth and the great sacrifice was consummated which made all men for ever indebted in the account of love, she wept tears of sorrow for the story itself, of joy for its magnificent meaning which no man could have conceived.

" There is one thing I cannot get over," she said once as he told her the story of the Samaritan, " that He should have lived amongst human beings. Can you imagine it ? He must have left the country and the people in whose midst he lived flooded with light for ever."

Alonso smiled enigmatically and dared not answer.

A few days after these events, on November 8th for the Spaniards, on one of the first days of the month of the Flamingo for the Mexicans, the sun shone on one of the most colourful and dramatic scenes which its radiant eye ever saw and brought to light on this obscure earth. On the chief causeway of Tenochtitlán, that which connected the island-city with Iztapalapa, two processions were moving slowly towards each other. A row of Mexican noblemen and captains advanced along each side of the causeway, close to the line of houses and *teocallis* on either side. They advanced one behind the other at an interval of about three feet. They were gorgeously dressed, bejewelled and beplumed, but barefoot. This last detail announced to the crowd that the Emperor would be in the procession. But many of these colourful notables had passed and there was still no sign of the sweepers who preceded the imperial litter to leave the streets spotless before his exacting eye.

Moteczuma had entered his chapel. It was a resplendent hall, fifty feet wide and one hundred and fifty feet long; its walls were covered with golden plates half an inch thick, framed within pillars of solid silver. On supports of solid gold a number of specially selected torches lit the hall with smokeless flames which drew vivid reflections from numberless emeralds, rubies, topazes, *chalchivitls* and other stones with which the walls and ceiling were constellated. The chapel was thus a chamber of metal, crystal and fire, a kind of crucible wholly uninhabitable for any ordinary human feeling. It was in this secret temple that Moteczuma came to re-temper the metal of his soul when fear or lust had softened its steely quality.

He had planned to prepare himself for that day of his chief ordeal by a specially conceived sacrifice. He had cast wide the nets of his state organisation, his *calpixques* and his spies, in order to procure himself a man with a beard—a rare bird among the Mexican people. One had been found in his collection of human oddities; another one had been brought to him from one of the western islands of the Pacific coast. He chose this second man because he had a beard more like those of the new-comers. The *cuauhxicalli* of his private chapel, on which the victim's heart was usually thrown after the sacrifice, was a gorgeous basin of gold, three feet in diameter, with a hole in the middle. The sacrificial stone, in the shape of a ridged cross, was covered with a sheet of gold. It was extremely rare for a sacrifice to be performed in that temple, and the officiating priest was always Moteczuma himself. Quetzalcoatl, decked with strings of golden shrimps hanging from his neck and knees, looked on. His round, black eyes, seemed to

be staring at the long, black shiny blade of obsidian inserted in a golden handle which awaited the heart of his victim.

Moteczuma entered the room and cast a glance at his prospective victim who was tied up on the golden-covered sacrificial stone, his face upwards, his arms held wide apart. The Emperor was pleased at the look of the man. "He looks exactly like the pictures, and even like the heads I threw into the lake," he thought. He seized the knife, squatted before the shrine and prayed: "Oh lord Quetzalcoatl, reveal thy mystery. Speak. Are they your men? Must I give up my sway over this land and deliver it to them? Speak. I offer you this victim chosen for his resemblance to them so that you understand what is in my heart."

He rose to his feet. He threw back his blue mantle, stepped towards the victim, lifted his arm, thus catching vivid reflections of the flames in the black mirror of the obsidian knife, and thrust the knife into the bare wide chest of the victim. It struck a hard rib and the obsidian broke into tiny splinters which fell on to the golden floor in a rain of tinkling, gay little sounds. Moteczuma stepped back, white with holy terror, with the empty golden handle in his hand, his arms thrown backwards, his head forward, his eyes glued to the victim. The unfortunate man had closed his eyes and no motion, not even the slightest breath, seemed to animate his body.

The emperor let the golden handle fall from his inert fingers and, without daring to look back at Quetzalcoatl, left the chapel, slowly, slowly. He struck a gong by the door. Petalcatcatl who waited outside, drew the three curtains which separated his master from the outer hall. "Have him sacrificed in the teocalli," he said to his chief steward.

The three imperial golden-stick heralds were waiting. They raised their sticks high, formed in a row and started off. Moteczuma walked behind. As they emerged under the archway of the outer yard, the litter was waiting. It was a magnificent construction, of silver and gold, richer still in its craftsmanship than in its noble materials; over the elaborately carved pillars, an awning of precious feathers was supported by a trellis-work of gold. At the crossing of every two lines of gold, a precious stone glittered imitating a nail-head. Moteczuma was about to step into the litter when Petalcatcatl reappeared. "Sir," he said, "the victim was dead."

Moteczuma paused a while. He stood by his litter, one hand resting on the golden pillar while the other held his golden wand, his eyes on the red and blue carpet which covered the stone floor. The two long lines of his notables and captains who had preceded him were waiting on the road. He meditated. Quetzalcoatl had not accepted his sacrifice. He left to meet the White Chief still in utter darkness. What was he to do? He came to the conclusion that the

safest line was to assume that Cortés was the man of Quetzalcotal. If this was a mistake, it was a safer mistake and one that could be more easily corrected. He stepped into the litter, sat down on his silver ycpalli and struck the edge of it with his wand. The bearers, magnificently dressed but barefoot, moved off.

19

Meanwhile Cortés had left Iztapalapa and had entered the causeway towards Tenochtitlán. The lagoon could not be seen, for it was literally blotted out by canoes crowded with men, women and children, standing open-eyed, drinking in the astonishing sight. Many men had children on their shoulders. A number of Cempoalese auxiliaries opened the march; then came two hounds held in leash by two Spanish soldiers. A murmur of excitement arose from the lagoon as the crowd cast eyes on the strange animals and the still stranger men. But the astonishment of the multitude knew no bounds when, all of a sudden, Cortés on his chestnut mare appeared at the head of a squadron of four lines of three horsemen, one of whom was Alonso who had met the army—and his horse—at Iztapalapa. The sight of the bearded men, many, in fact most, of whom, were fair or red-haired and blue-eyed, riding the biggest animals the Mexicans had ever seen or imagined, filled every soul with a kind of religious awe—for in those thousands of souls, as in most human beings, fear and worship were closely allied feelings. The serried ranks of helmeted and armoured infantry men followed in perfect formation and after them came rows of tlamemes carrying the guns, while the rearguard was closed by a horseman at the head of a few hundreds of native allies.

The wonder the Spaniards felt was at least as deep as that which they were causing. Not one of them, not even their bold and imaginative chief, had ever dreamt of Mexico as it was, a city of enchantment, an exotic Venice, with so many and such striking tokens of order, civilisation and wealth, so much architectural dignity, such a vast population, in which their trained eye at once counted possible soldiers, eventual enemies . . . And while drinking in the sight, the sun-bathed colours of brown, yellow, white houses and teocallis, the shining copper of the bodies, the variegated huipils and maxtlatls, the plumage of the warriors, the blue of the skies, the snow of the mountain-tops; the soldiers and captains ruminated over their dangerous conquest, comparing their own lack of military strength with that which could easily be guessed in the bosom of so many and such orderly people, and they took refuge in the Lord who had brought them so far and had chosen them for the most glorious conquest ever attempted in His name.

Meanwhile, in the vanguard, Cortés had dismounted from his horse. Within a few yards some courtiers were laying a blue carpet along the middle of the causeway. Moteczuma's litter had been turned sideways and laid on the edge of the carpet. Moteczuma alighted and bowed. Cortés stepped forward and threw his arms round the Emperor's neck. It was the natural gesture—union of the old and the new—which his heart prompted him to attempt. But Cacama and Cuitlahuac who, in their royal attire, with mantle and diadem, stood on the right and on the left of Moteczuma, prevented the gesture which in their eyes was sacrilegious, and gently but firmly held him back. Moteczuma was staring right into the eyes of Cortés. He had met no human eyes since his coronation, with the sole exception of Xuchitl's. Any human eyes, with that mysterious sense of spiritual presence which they manage to convey—not merely the presence of another creature, but the presence of the Other, of the ever mysterious spirit-at-large—would probably have moved him after so many years during which he had voluntarily cut himself off from all visual communication with other souls. But the eyes of Cortés were exceptionally rich and magnetic, and as Moteczuma's eyes met them he felt a torrent of life rushing into his inner being. "Yes," he thought, "he is the man of Quetzalcoatl." He turned to Petalcalcatl who stood behind him and said: "Have the god's insignia ready at hand."

"My lord," he said then to Cortés, "you have returned to your country and people. Here they are at your disposal. I deliver them into your hands." Alonso translated it. "Sir," answered Cortés, "you speak as a great, noble and generous monarch. I do not come to take anything from you. I come on a mission which I shall explain at more leisure, and I must thank you for having come out to meet me." He then threw over Moteczuma's neck a necklace of glass-beads which he himself was wearing. Petalcalcatl had delivered into Moteczuma's hands a packet wrapped in white cotton cloth. The emperor undid it and with his own hands decorated his guest with two of the necklaces of golden shrimps which hung from the neck of Quetzalcoatl in his gold and silver chapel. A vast wave of awe swayed the crowd which watched the scene, and its long murmur went to stir ripples of excited comment to the edges of the lagoon.

One by one the notables and captains filed past before Cortés, knelt on one knee, touched the earth and put their fingers to their mouths. Their dazzling green, red, blue, yellow head-dresses swept the clean avenue as they bowed low before the White stranger whom their chief priest and emperor had just deified in their eyes. Alonso stood by his chief's side. He had spotted Ixcawatzin waiting his turn in the queue of brilliant courtiers and war-chiefs. Ixcawatzin was wearing the proud regalia with which he had come to Alonso's quarters

in Tetzcuco on the very night of his restoration to honour. There were now but two men left in the queue between Ixcawatzin and Cortés. Ixcawatzin had certainly seen Alonso, but he showed no sign of it. He seemed to have sunk back into his Mexican self, ignorant of all things and persons of the White world. The two men had now passed. Ixcawatzin bowed low and stretched his hand towards the earth. He did not touch the earth. He then drew his hand towards his mouth. He did not touch his mouth.

Alonso saw it all.

20

Ixcawatzin had returned to Tenochtitlán and settled in the Calmecac of the imperial capital, a welcome change from Tetzcuco where he left so many bitter memories. He had been summoned along with hundreds of other notables to attend the ceremony of the arrival of Quetzalcoatl's men and had complied with the imperial order with bitterness in his heart. Deep down in his soul, this arrival of the Spanish force to supersede the emperor of Anahuac was for him but the arrival of Alonso to supersede him in Xuchitl's heart, writ large. He felt the same about both ; in fact he did not discriminate between the two feelings. Moteczuma throwing the necklace of golden shrimps, the symbol of Quetzalcoatl, round the neck of the White Chief was but another incarnation of Ixcawatzin giving back to Xuchitl the golden chain with the Heart of Jade which he had found round the neck of Alonso. So that, when the hateful ceremony was over and he returned to his solitary cell, he shut himself up in gloomy self-contemplation, and his thoughts revolved again on death as the only redeemer from a life henceforward fruitless.

He was brooding over all this when he heard the soft strains of a melody played on a plaintive flute to the accompaniment of ringing bells and the drone of a murmuring crowd. He went to the window. A youth strangely clad was passing by, followed by a number of worshippers as if he were a god. He was a god—for the time being. On seeing him, passers-by squatted in the worshipful posture till he had gone out of sight. He was handsome, exceptionally so. He was painted all over dark brown, nearly black, and he wore on his head a crest of white hen-feathers stuck with resin ; he wore his hair long like a woman and hanging down his back to the waist ; on his chest, a long white stone hanging from a thin chain of gold, and a garland of flowers. Two other garlands crossed each other over his chest and back. Under the flowers, his back was adorned with a square of white cotton with frills and tassels. He wore golden bracelets on the upper part of both arms, above the elbows, while between his elbows and his

wrists he exhibited rich cascades of bracelets of precious stones under which the forearms were entirely hidden. His loincloth was elaborate and luxurious and included a large ornamental piece of cloth which fell from the waist down to his knees. Otherwise he was naked, for the cotton "wrap" he wore was more like a fisherman's net than a cloak, and it was rich and decorated with an abundance of tassels. Round his knees, on bands of cotton-cloth, rows of golden bells rang melodiously as he walked. His shoes were of deer-skin painted all over in gay colours.

Ixcawatzin recognised the youth selected to incarnate the god of gods, Tetzcatlipuca, who would be sacrificed in the coming month of Toxcatl. For a year he enjoyed music, worship, divinity; and during his last twenty days, the love of four specially selected young women—then the obsidian knife and death. He went about with a nosegay of roses in his right hand, and in his left an aromatic cigar; enjoying now the aroma of the flowers, now the inebriating smoke of the holy herb. Now and then he would beckon to his eight pages, who, brilliantly clad, were always in attendance, gave them the flowers and the silver holder of his cigar and took up his flute on which he played like one who knows that the value of every minute's breath is increasing with every minute he breathes.

Ixcawatzin knew him well. The Divine Youth for the current year had been his disciple in the Calmecac. Many a time, as he beheld the impeccable body of his youthful disciple, Ixcawatzin had felt sure that the priests would select him as a choice victim for the god of gods. He fell into a reverie about the fate of that young man. In a few months they would prepare him for his last twenty days: they would wash the paint off his body, cut his hair short in the military way and tie it up on top of the head in a tuft held by a band adorned with two golden tassels; and they would give him twenty days of love with four beautiful girls—to be sure, none of them as beautiful as Xuchitl, but still four girls who would transfigure that last month into a real paradise. It would be like those dull days which suddenly become vivid and beautiful at sunset. For it was obvious to Ixcawatzin that love of woman was the essence and joy of man's life. Was not then this life of the youth sacrificed to the gods the ideal life? A year without cares, without responsibilities; eight pages; beauty of the senses; just a little discipline so as not to get fat and therefore unworthy of the god of beauty, and if necessary a few pots of salted water to be swallowed to keep thin; but otherwise, choice foods, choice aromas, the soft melodies of a suave flute; and that marvellous, stirring sunset on the couch of love with the full knowledge that nothing could make that love stale and dusty and sad, for it was to die ere it could age, die in the full blossom of its vigorous spring. Yes. That was the true way of

life, and he was the sadder for having passed it by—he whose body was just as impeccable and perfect—and for having consented to go down into the arena of daily strife and to soil his being with the sweat and dust of battle and with the tears of disappointment.

The Divine Youth turned the corner and Ixcawatzin could hear the carefree melody of his flute till it melted away in the light of the sunset.

21

Cortés kept his army confined to barracks for a few days. He wanted to avoid any possible clash or incident in the midst of such a big town, and so powerful, with so few men at his disposal, until he had ascertained the actual position behind his almost miraculous and bloodless conquest. It meant no special hardship for his troops, since the palaces and grounds of Axayacatl, in which the Spanish Army had been housed, were vast and pleasant. But the soldiery were eager to prowl about in search of novelty and adventures. They had been astounded by the beauty of the Aztec Venice and were longing to come into closer contact with it.

After a few days in barracks, the soldiers were allowed to roam about the town in twos and threes, as so to be able to lend help to each other . . . and to watch each other as well. Everywhere they went the Spaniards found the Mexicans making arrows. They were impressed at first and some of them went back to report the matter to Cortés. The general summoned Alonso; he explained that the Mexicans were in the month of Quecholli or the Flamingo when the traditional ceremonies included offerings of arrows to Witchilopochtli. "Let our men watch the kind of arrows which are being made and they will see that they are not fit for war, though they are neatly and carefully put together. The point and the butt are of oak but the stem is just a reed." Cortés listened attentively. "It might be wise to keep a close watch on those arrows, all the same, and to see what becomes of them," he retorted cautiously.

He had appointed Alonso Chief Constable for Tenochtitlán, with strict orders to avoid quarrels and clashes with the Mexicans. Most of the Spaniards invaded the *Tianghiz* or market-place and, though already familiar with the native markets, were in admiration before the wealth and variety of the wares sold in that of Tenochtitlán and at the order which prevailed in it. The air was cool, but the sun was bright and warmed it. The awnings in the centre of the square seemed woven with light, for they were luminous on both sides of their gracefully curved surfaces, and as they were disposed in regular rows, their lines made a pattern of concave, inverted vaults of light and sun, a

replica to the arches of darkness under the vaults of the gallery round the square. A flowing crowd of buyers streamed past a fixed crowd of sellers, but there was little murmur of voices. "It is like a deaf-and-dumb-market," said Vicente Esquivel, who, with a group of Spaniards, had entered the Tianguiz.

Everywhere they went the Spaniards were followed by a trail of men, women and above all children, fascinated by their looks and language. They themselves were no less fascinated by all they saw. What struck them most was not that it was strange and new, but that it was neither new nor strange. They had expected some weird new world, cast in exotic forms and habits—men with their heads in their stomachs, or with tails, houses made of glass or even less imaginable, in fact wholly unimagined things; what they found was a market-place just like any other market-place in Spain, with regulations just like those of their Spanish cities, wares of all kinds arranged on rows of booths, just as in Spain, and constables loafing about along the alleys to see that the merchants did not cheat, just as in Spain, and allowing a certain amount of cheating, just as in Spain. They saw barber-shops, inns where one could eat a meal and taverns where one could drink. "Where?" asked Gallego. "There, in the corner, under the arch," answered Esquivel. They crossed the alley of the bird-merchants, stopped for a while to admire the popinjays and vanished into the pulque shop. They had learnt to appreciate the native *teomell* or spirit of maguey, more perhaps than their captains would wish, and when, after a while, they emerged from the cool concavity of the tavern, they were all flushed and more than naturally gay. It seemed to them as if the market were more lively by all the liveliness they had imbibed, and everything they saw struck them as odd and funny. They gradually excited each other into an irresponsible mood. They made a circle round the popinjays and endeavoured to enter into a conversation with the gaudy and garrulous birds, which the difference in language made difficult. The Spaniards had picked up a few words of Nautatl, not all of the choicest.

"Listen, *tlatoani*," said Esquivel to one of the popinjays.

"What do you call him 'governor' for?" asked Gallego.

Esquivel looked at his comrade with contempt. "Don't you know what the word means? *Tlatoani*, the governor, means the one who speaks. Leave this business in my hands." He turned to the bird. "Listen, *tlatoani*. Let us hear you speak." The popinjay remained silent and haughty, perched on his stick, slightly above their heads, while the merchant, who was sitting on a mat on the ground, sorting seeds, cast uneasy eyes at the strangers. "*Tlatoani! Tlat—*" repeated Esquivel. The bird looked down on him and suddenly thrust at him: "*Mauhqui!*" then, more vigorously: "*Mauhcatlacatl!*"

The Spaniards stepped back and grew pale. Gallego drew his hand to his sword. "What!" he exclaimed in a fury. "He calls us cowards!" It was one of the few words they knew well for they had often heard it hurled at them by the Tlaxcatec warriors at the beginning of their battles, as was the custom in all Anahuac. Esquivel was laughing. "Are you mad? Will you be offended by a parrot?" But in Gallego's mind the fumes of pulque had obliterated the border-line (not, it must be owned, very clearly marked by nature) between man and parrot, and he was resolved to avenge his honour. "How do you say *whoreson* in this damned lingo?" he asked. Esquivel, the linguist of the group, supplied the answer. "*Tetelpuch aviani*." Gallego turned to the bird, and taking a short cut through his own Castillian, he shouted: "Listen, Tetelputa!" And he slapped the parrot in the face as if the bird had been a man. The parrot's wings beat the air, all feathers out, electrified, and he flew at his aggressor, but the string which attached him to his perch cut his proud flight dead and he fell, hanging pitifully by his leg. The patient Indian rushed to the rescue. The six Spaniards found themselves surrounded by quite as many native constables who, speaking to each other between their teeth, gradually drew them away without much resistance on their part. The Spaniards knew their general would punish them severely if the incident grew graver, and though they had drunk more than they should have done, this feeling helped them to accept their discomfiture.

The constables reported the matter to the judges of the market who sat permanently during market hours in the justice-hall, and the judges sent a message to the headquarters of the Spanish Army where Alonso had his office as Chief Spanish Constable. Alonso decided to go in person with a number of men to avoid further trouble. But trouble came quicker than he expected. The six Spaniards had left the Tlanquitz and had turned the corner into one of the adjoining streets when they heard the sound of a flute and the tinkling of bells. The Divine Youth was passing. The Spaniards were astonished at the strange sight. The Divine Youth finished his melody, handed the flute to his pages and took from them a nosegay of pale yellow roses. As they saw him plunge his head into the nosegay and inhale the delicate aroma, they grinned, looked at each other and roared with laughter. "How pretty he is. Won't his mother, the whore, be proud?" said Esquivel and every one of the others improved on this statement with a regular cascade of bawdy jokes. The crowd of worshippers was shocked and indignant. The Spaniards laughed and joked. A woman passed by and squatted devoutly. The youth struggled hard to maintain his divine dignity, which centuries of a worshipful custom, made grave by death, had sanctified. The Spaniards laughed. Esquivel stepped forward and caressed the Divine Youth under the chin, with mock

tenderness. "Oh you, mother's darling!" He was knocked down violently by a warrior who happened to be passing by. The swords shone in the sun—the warrior and the Divine Youth fell, shedding blood from deep gashes in their naked bodies. The crowd was aghast with a kind of religious terror.

Alonso appeared with twenty men. He took in the situation at a glance. He closed the two ends of the street, posting five armed men at each end, and sent for reinforcements. Cortés, on hearing the brief report brought to him, sent definite instructions to his Chief Constable: No one, native or Spaniard, connected with the affray was to be allowed out of his sight. All were to be locked up. The incident should remain secret.

22

Cortés took these prompt measures to meet what in his mind was an ordinary street affray which had caused the death of two Mexican nobles. No one, save Alonso, was in a position to realise how grave the incident had been. Long Face, whom he consulted, was seized with terror at the thought that the Divine Youth of the year had been slain. Alonso ardently desired to minimise the incident, the more so as his enemy, Esquivel, was implicated. The bodies had been removed by night to the Spanish headquarters and, as a result of Alonso's discreet negotiations, one of the highest dignitaries of the Mexican Church was summoned the same night to discuss the event.

The fact in itself did not trouble this high-priest. The whole of Mexico would have been awe-struck at the death of the year's Divine Youth, had the event been known; the high priest, however, kept his head as to that. What troubled him was that there were no precedents. No Divine Youth had ever departed from this world save at the stroke of a priestly knife. The people would never understand anything else. How were the priests to explain to the people that a youth impersonating the god of gods had perished at the hands of a white stranger? That fact, if known, would finally establish the popular belief which, very much to the displeasure of the priests, attributed to the Spaniards the attribute and even the name of gods—*teotl*.

His first decision, therefore, was to have all the natives who had been present sacrificed, and he gave orders to that effect. But that did not dispose of his chief difficulty. He stood there in the yard of the palace where the Spaniards were quartered, casting eyes of doubt and concern, now at Alonso now, at the body of the Divine Youth, black and bloodstained on a white cloth, under the cold and indifferent moon. The more he revolved it in his mind, the more difficult the

problem seemed to him. He turned on Alonso his fiery black eyes under a deeply wrinkled forehead topped by a heavy mane of black and grey hair, and said : " Tell the Great Chief that I cannot solve this by myself. My advice is : burn this warrior's body to-night. Let me have the divine body and we shall settle it. We are even more concerned than you are in keeping it secret."

23

Through the deserted streets, under the silent moon, the body of the Divine Youth was conveyed to the Calmecac by two Spanish soldiers, under a strong guard commanded by Alonso to keep the curious away. It was received by the priests and laid on a native contrivance made mostly of mats and cotton covers ; the Spaniards withdrew and the doors of the Calmecac were closed behind the divine remains. The body was laid in the centre of the temple of Tetzcatlipuca and the chief priests sat on mats around it. Ixcawatzin was one of them.

A funeral response was first intoned—a monotone which prolonged itself for an hour, each man in turn singing the main orison while the others took on the litany or refrain. Then the priest who had been in the Spanish headquarters explained the situation and there was a silence while every one thought it over. The Chief Priest then spoke : " It seems to me that if this incarnation of Tetzcatlipuca died it can only have been because Tetzcatlipuca himself wished it so." A rumour of approval rewarded this orthodox assertion. One of the priests cut in : " No one should wonder. We live in an impious age." Another priest objected : " Why, the Emperor is a pious man. No month, no day goes by without fresh blood being offered in our temples." But the first objector was contemptuous. " What is that to the good old days, when in one day only Ahuizotl offered to Witchilopochtli twenty thousand victims and the priests had to take turns because their arms were exhausted with wielding the obsidian knife and the queues of the victims reached as far as the countryside ? " The High Priest called the debate to order. " These historical arguments are irrelevant. The fact is the Divine Youth has died ; and therefore, by the will of the god he incarnated, for nothing else makes sense and sense is the chief condition of man. All we have to do is to convey this truth to our people by some story which will penetrate through their eyes. There is only one way that I can see : we shall make it our official version that the Divine Youth was in prayer before the altar of Tetzcatlipuca when the god with his own spear struck him dead." A second murmur of approval passed through the assembly. " To make it easy for us to remember the fact, I remind you that the

god killed his impersonation as the monastery bell struck midnight prayers. Swear!" All touched the ground and put their fingers in their mouths.

The Chief Priest spoke again. "We have to select another Divine Youth." Ixcawatzin then said: "By your leave, sir, may I submit that the new Divine Youth should be chosen bearing in mind what has occurred and that we should depart from our tradition and select him, not amongst untrained youths but amongst fully trained soldiers, capable of defending themselves." There was a silence, while all those present thought it over. The Chief Priest then voiced the question which had arisen in everybody's mind: "Do you know of a soldier seasoned enough to defend himself, young enough to please Tetzcatlipuca and free enough to offer himself to die?"

"Yes, sir," answered Ixcawatzin. "Myself."

24

When Cortés was able to realise the full import of the incident which had caused the death of the Divine Youth he was indignant. His men had broken his orders on their very first day of liberty, and provoked a clash which might have brought about disastrous consequences. Had not Alonso taken such drastic measures to isolate it, and had not the priests thought more of the immediate effects on their authority than of the use they might have made of the crime to destroy the strangers in their midst under a powerful wave of popular indignation, Cortés' bold enterprise might have ended on that day and his life with it. After some reflection, he came to the conclusion that he had again been protected by the hand of the Lord, for had it not been for the comedy of the parrot, Alonso would not have been on the spot, and the tragedy of the Divine Youth would have been irreparable. He made up his mind to make an example and sentenced Esquivel, Gallego and their two companions to death.

The four men were jailed and put in irons. Father Olmedo went to see them to prepare them for their coming ordeal. Esquivel was inconsolable and bitter. He could not keep his mind off Alonso to whom he attributed all his misfortunes. "He is a vindictive dog, Father, I know. He has not forgotten . . . old scores." Esquivel would not add details, "But," objected the good Father, "he saved your life when Alvarado was going to strike you dead. Is that your gratitude?" Esquivel scratched his greasy bandaged head (for he had been slightly hurt when the warrior had knocked him down on the hard slabs of the street). "Just show," he retorted. "If he had not reported me he would not have had to save my life. And he is a

hypocrite. He goes about pretending that he wants neither gold nor women, but . . . I know many things." The priest was aggrieved. "Keep them to yourself if they are uncharitable. This is not the moment—" he broke off, thinking the hint would suffice. It did suffice to bring back the thought of death to the unfortunate man. He burst into tears and, through his sobs, went on cursing his enemy. "And to think that he keeps a woman, yes, a woman in Tetzcuco—I have seen her in the king's palace—and she gives him chalchiwits and I know one is magical and has been blessed by the devil and here I am going to die for such a cursed Jew!" He sobbed again. "If we only had an Inquisition here!"

Father Olmedo did his best to calm him. He tended his wound, and tried to make a bargain with him. "If you promise me that you will endeavour to change your mind on Don Alonso Manrique, I promise I will do my best to have you reprieved by the Captain General." Vicente Esquivel promised. But the friar knew all about voice and gesture and did not believe that the sinner would repent.

Nevertheless, he began his own efforts immediately. He went to see Alonso first. "Father," said Alonso. "I wanted to see you on a personal business." "And so did I you," answered Olmedo. "Let me listen to you first," said Alonso deferentially. And the friar began: "We must try to have those men reprieved," he said without beating about the bush. But Alonso retorted: "If that is your business, it fits in with mine most beautifully. For my plan is that you should marry me to-morrow and take that as the pretext the general needs to let his heart speak." Olmedo was astonished. "But that is a marvellous scheme. Only you need . . . a lady." Alonso smiled. "That is my secret—or one of them." Then he looked grave and said: "It is nine in the morning. I have a long story to tell. It must be a confession. Are you ready?" "I am," answered Father Olmedo. Alonso went to the door and said to Long Face who was acting as his sentinel: "Let no one in, Spaniard or native, till further instructions." He came back, knelt before a Crucifix which hallowed the wall of his room, and prayed for a brief instant. Father Olmedo observed his face and was struck by his earnestness.

Alonso gave the friar a brief account of his life—not omitting the Marta Esquivel episode—but insisting on his crime and on the penitence imposed on him by Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros. He explained how he had so far succeeded in honouring this heavy obligation, but added that he no longer felt confident in his power to do so, because he was ardently in love with Xuchitl. Some inner force prevented him from mentioning the Heart of Jade, but he told the friar of his temptation that night and how it had vanished after his fight with Ixcawatzin in the dark. When Alonso finished his tale, the friar kept silent for a

moment which seemed a century to Alonso. "Father, do you possess the power to free me from my bond?" Father Olmedo was still absorbed in thought. Alonso waited, in agony. At last, the friar, with a smile: "Let me see, you have kept your vow for . . . how many years?" "For eight years, Father." The friar smiled again. "Eight years!" he cried out in admiration. "I am sure that if the Cardinal were alive he would let you off the rest of his penitence. I will marry you to-morrow and take it upon my conscience."

Alonso buried his face in his hands, to hide his joy. "But stay. How about the lady. Is she a Christian?" Alonso felt at peace about that. "In all but the name and the Holy Water. You will christen her first and marry her afterwards. But," he added, "there still remains the most difficult thing to do. You must talk to the general and make him be the best man. And Xuchitl will ask and obtain the life of the four men."

25

Father Olmedo was pleased to see that Cortés liked the idea of Alonso's marriage. The good friar had feared for a moment that he would not, and so had Alonso himself. The fact is that Cortés and his companions had granted to the native ladies every possible distinction save marriage. They treated them as ladies and had them served not merely by native but by Spanish servants; in every way respected as their unofficial wives or concubines; but, so far, no captain had actually married any of the many high-born women who had been given them, a fact which the donors were too ignorant of Spanish institutions to observe. Yet, in Cortés' mind, there was no prejudice against such a course. For him the matter was one of purely personal import; and if Alonso desired to marry Nezawal Pilli's daughter, he saw no objection. Rather did he see an advantage in it; for Nezawal Pilli's daughter was Cacama's half sister, and Cortés knew that the young King of Tetzcuco was not a friend of the Spaniards. At any time in the near future he might have to take strong measures against him. It was, therefore, to the advantage of all concerned that a princess with some more or less shadowy claim to the throne of Tetzcuco should be married to a Spaniard—and baptised.

He had his own plans for the next day, and so gave orders that the ceremony should take place that very afternoon. The Spaniards had built a chapel inside the palace of Axayacatl, their headquarters. It was simple and humble, in the style of their Castillian churches, white-washed walls, tiled floors and a simple altar the main ornament of which was a Flemish picture of the Mother and Child from the chapel

of one of the "burnt" ships. But flowers and candles are wonderful elements for decoration, and Long Face who, with Citlali as his helper, and his experience of his Otomi days to go by, had taken charge of the work, could not withhold a movement of admiration at the effect of the work of his own hands.

Xuchitl was in white and wore a garland of white flowers and a veil of cotton muslin from her rich stores. She was happy but grave. She moved in a dream. For her it was as if the gates of Paradise had suddenly been opened and she was to enter on a life of bliss. When she arrived at the door of the chapel, on Cortés' arm, and saw the Mother and Child above tier upon tier of burning candles she—who had never seen a single candle burn—was overpowered by the sheer beauty of the spectacle, for the flame of a single humble candle is one of the most beautiful things on earth save that we are used to it, and one hundred candles burning together steadily in a geometric design form the highest representation of the spirit, self-consuming fire and mental order together. Cortés felt her weight as she nearly fainted with emotion, and as every pair of eyes in the chapel was turned on her, all could see that she grew pale, her eyes became wide and starry, she touched her heart . . . But she was of good stock and recovered; a smile lit up her lips and two roses blossomed in her cheeks. Father Olmedo and the priest Juan Díaz had donned their pontifical robes. By the altar, a piece of Moteczuma's extravagant treasure, a huge conch made of massive gold, had been filled with holy water. Father Olmedo baptised Xuchitl. Alonso was holding a candle for the friar to read the ritual words out of his book. As she felt the drops of water on her head, she thrilled all over and looked at him. He was struggling desperately with his emotion, knowing his comrades had their eyes on him—but as his eyes met hers, his mastery failed him for an instant and big round tears drowned his vision of the unforgettable scene.

The first part of the ceremony was over. María Rosa—for such was to be her name—was led by Cortés to a chair where she was to rest and meditate during the mass. It was said by the priest, while Father Olmedo knelt in prayer, preparing his mind for the sermon. When his turn came, the good friar addressed his congregation of soldiers, drawing the lesson from the events of the day. Nothing but the conversion of the natives to the Light of Christ could justify the Conquest. Therefore, he concluded, not only every non-Christian act on their part, but even every indifferent act not directly concerned with the conversion of the natives, made of them thieves and murderers. Cortés approved with his head. Then, with Cortés and Doña Marina as "godfather and godmother" in the Spanish fashion, the marriage ceremony was performed by Father Olmedo. Amongst the many treasures already amassed out of the presents sent him by Moteczuma

on several occasions, Cortés had chosen two gold rings, with emeralds for Xuchitl, with rubies for Alonso ; Xuchitl-Maria-Rosa followed the moving acts of the ceremony with a fascination enhanced by their deep symbolical character, and in particular the exchange of rings which seemed to her so full of meaning, and reminded her of the exchange of the Heart of Jade and the medal—a kind of pre-ceremony of their marriage which she and Alonso had performed instinctively soon after they had met. As the final blessing fell on their bowed heads, and after an instant of silence and prayer, Xuchitl rose, threw her arms round her husband's neck and leant her head on his chest. The whole army felt the symbolical value of that moment. Union in love between the two peoples. It was more eloquent than volumes of laws and books of sermons. It was beautiful, telling, unanswerable. But above all, it did not speak. It was.

Cortés had discreetly receded into the background and taken his seat beside the altar. She looked round for him. She knew but a few words of Spanish and had worked hard to learn the lesson for that day by heart. She went smiling towards the general, knelt at his feet, and in a voice as loud as she could make it, which rang with its sweet, awkward, unexpected tone and words and message, she said :

" Sir, I implore you, forgive the four men you have punished."

He frowned at first, displeased, but it was a fleeting cloud. He smiled, took both her hands, helped her to rise to her feet and answered: " Let them live, my lady, to bless your charity."

26

Cortés and his captains with their native ladies, Doña Marina and the Tlaxcalan beauties, gave a brilliant fête for the newly-married couple. The hall, one of the gorgeously decorated ceremonial rooms of Emperor Axayacatl's palace, had never witnessed such a sight, for within its walls, hung with featherwork of delicate workmanship, a table set in the Spanish fashion, fully three feet from the ground, with chairs which had legs, was of course a wholly exotic affair. Cortés had the Renaissance taste for beautiful luxury and liked to do things well. The plate and service were of silver or gold, out of his stores of presents. The bill of fare was abundant and admirably cooked and presented by his household, for he lived like a prince, though he could rough it like a soldier, which at heart he was. There was only one defect to the banquet—the lack of wine. Father Olmedo had reported that his stores were so low that he would soon have to cease saying mass at all, for lack of wine ; and Cortés decided to limit the consumption that evening to one glass for the bride, one for the bridegroom

and one for himself to drink their health. Despite the lack of wine, however, the fête was happy and gay and all enjoyed it, except of course the bride and bridegroom who would have preferred to be alone.

Father Olmedo was not of it. He had gone to report their reprieve to the four sentenced men, and was afflicted to find that, while three of them shed tears of gratitude, Esquivel remained cold and obdurate. The good friar could not make him out. Esquivel was overjoyed at the news, for he loved life ; but he was affronted and embittered at the thought that he owed his life to Alonso—for that was what it meant to him. The account of the hated Manrique was growing heavier and heavier in his black, envious soul. He hated all those good deeds which increased his moral slavery to the handsome Manrique. It was not enough to have been born under the Castle, undistinguished and plain ; to have had to get out of the way ; to have seen a sister . . . well, let that remain in the background. But on top of that, one had still to be grateful for repeated acts of generosity in which Manrique's big soul invaded one's little soul and forced it to acknowledge itself grateful, that is, lower, bound to bow before the benefactor. Esquivel could not swallow the insult. He felt insulted, yes, and worst of all, he could not explain it, put it into words. There was that final suggestion that he should go and grovel in humiliation at the feet of Alonso and of his woman—never. Not he.

The friar returned followed by Gallego and the other two men. "Yes, Father," they said out of the abundance of their hearts, "we shall kiss the ground which that lady treads." He found Alonso and Xuchitl with a group of other captains and Cortés in a room adjoining the banquet hall. The meal was over. "Don Alonso, here are three men who want to kiss my lady's feet. Esquivel is sorry, he feels too ill to come." The men entered the room and knelt before Xuchitl, weeping, trying to kiss her little feet, naked within native cotaras of white deer-skin. But she gave them her hands which they covered with tears. Her eyes were brilliant with tears also. She rose and took the three men to Cortés. "Alonso," she said in Nauatl, "ask them to thank the general." The men needed no instructions. They thanked Cortés. And he, with his severe eye said, "Next time, lady or no lady, you will pay with your lives. Remember, no man is a man who lets drink beat him."

Cortés had given Alonso a set of rooms in the palace for himself and his wife and the service of his household, which included Citlali and Long Face. It was intimate and comfortable, furnished in the Aztec way. There, Alonso and his Christian wife withdrew after the moving scenes of that unforgettable day. There was a terrace which ran round the whole suite of apartments—along the lagoon, on the side of the living-rooms, and along a street and a square of the town on that of the front bedroom. Alonso and Rosemary remained for a while on the terrace looking at the play of light on the sleeping water. They lived there a long moment of silent communion with nature and with themselves, as if both needed to calm their souls from the outside turmoil, so that the inner turmoil of their ardent love could, later in the night, rise undisturbed by any but its own impetus. Gradually the cool air of the moist night absorbed their worldly fevers and they felt calmed, turned to each other, alone, two in one, one in two. They withdrew to their bedroom. She opened a box in which she had brought some of her more prized treasures. "Alonso, here is your jewel again." She offered him the Heart of Jade which he had requested her to keep till after their marriage. He bowed his head low, for he was tall and she was little, and she put it round his neck.

He could now accept it with a clear conscience. At last he could give himself freely body and soul to the enjoyment of complete love. And soon afterwards all his past experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, left in his bodily memory as well as in the memory of his mind and emotions by the world of women, were burning together in a glorious fire of passionate love which transfigured them all into one new, luminous experience—the beloved at last possessed, the secret of life pierced at last, and at last perceived, for the self to bathe in it for ever and be reborn.

There seemed to be no time. It had not merely stopped. It was no more. Things were, but did not flow. They lay on their backs, side by side, in perfect balance with themselves and with life. Not a thought, Not a feeling. Not a sound.

But hark. Bells. Are they bells? Yes, bells. And a . . . Is it a flute? No . . . Yes. It is a flute. It seems to be coming closer and closer. Yes. You know what it is? I am sure it is the Divine Youth. But . . . He . . . died yesterday. Yes, but another one must have been appointed. Alonso went to the terrace. The moon was shining brightly over the town, casting dark blue shadows which brought out the cubic shapes of houses and teocallis into sharp relief. The Divine Youth came closer and closer. He turned the corner of the square. He was

playing his flute, playing his life out in long melancholy tunes. "Xuchitl!" cried Alonso, "come out!" She came out on to the terrace and glanced at the Divine Youth. "Oh! Ixcawatzin!" she cried.

She drew close to him, hid herself almost in him, shivering. The flute went on threading itself slowly and melodiously through the blue veil of the night, transfiguring the Divine Youth's breath into song; and gradually its melody and the bells died out in the night. Silence. Silence again. "Come in," said Xuchitl. "It is getting cold," and she pulled him by the hand. He followed her, smiling, his left hand in hers, his right playing with the Heart of Jade, which dangled happily on his chest.

PART XIII

THE TURQUOISE MASK AND THE VIRGIN

I

THAT NIGHT of bliss for Alonso and Xuchitl was a night of meditation and concern for Cortés. The fact was that he had never dreamt that the power and wealth of the Emperor of Anahuac could be so formidable and magnificent. Day by day, hour by hour, he perceived new signs, welcome in so far as they betokened wealth, unwelcome in so far as they betokened power; for he had penetrated so far inland that he could no longer retreat, and he had just short of five hundred men to pit against an Empire with an unlimited supply of men, weapons and food. He was not afraid; that was not his way of reacting to danger. He was concerned and busy in his mind, searching for a solution, for some bold way out. He faced his problem as he would have done in the Old World, unable to realise the difference between Mexican and European institutions. It seemed to him that the Monarch once secured, the country would be safe in his hand. His course, therefore lay clear—to seize Moteczuma and keep him under his control, not precisely as a prisoner, but as a closely watched guest.

He paced his room, to and fro, his hands behind his back, not yet fully convinced of his own plan. The city might react violently. Could he stand up to an outburst of popular fury? He thought he could, if he had the advantage of surprise and a complete loyalty on the part of his Spanish troops and native auxiliaries. But what would his

Spaniards think of it? Moteczuma had impressed them by his power and also by his lavishness. The Emperor was afraid and he endeavoured to keep the Spaniards pleased with presents of gold and girls. Would the soldiers and captains dare back him in his bold—almost desperate—plan? Some were already only too inclined to think the whole enterprise sheer folly. He went to and fro, pacing the room, his eyes on the polished floor, but seeing nothing but his own imaginations.

"By Your Mercy's leave!" said a voice at the door, and the tall, massive figure of Velázquez de León entered the room, filling it with his robust, carefree and spontaneous optimism.

"How so late?" asked Cortés.

"Good news cannot be allowed to tarry," answered Velázquez de León. "Your Mercy should know that Yáñez the carpenter, while trying the walls of this palace to build the altar, found a secret door, walled up."

"No. I did not know," said Cortés.

"Well. He suspected there was a hidden chamber behind it. Some of our men here sounded the natives and we are all convinced that what lies hidden there is the treasure of Emperor Axayacatl."

Cortés listened in silence. He had a way of relating things together, in a consistent pattern under the supreme control of Providence. As his captain spoke, he was saying to himself that the hidden treasure had been brought to him by Providence at that very moment, to provide a solution for his problem. The sight of the treasure would suffice to embolden his men.

"Where is it?" he asked. "Let us find out the truth of the matter."

The two men went out together and followed a long corridor, at the end of which three or four men were waiting mysteriously like conspirators. The carpenter-mason, Yáñez, was discussing his discovery with a youthful, vigorous, tall, bearded captain, Gonzalo de Sandoval, in whispers which ceased as soon as the general arrived on the scene. They all went into a hall close by, and Yáñez led Cortés to a corner where at first nothing could be seen to tell the spot. "Here, sir." Yáñez knocked on the door with his knuckles. "Does Your Mercy hear the difference? Here . . . and here." Cortés tried himself with his own hand. "Sandoval," he ordered, "put a few men to bar all access here, and you, Yáñez, knock this open with as little noise as you can."

Yáñez had no difficulty in "placing" the door by sounding, and then in removing the stucco. There was, in fact, no door—only the lintel of one which had been filled in with adobe and stucco. Cortés and his captains passed into the secret hall. Yáñez carried a slice of

burning ocotl in his hand. By the unsteady flames of the torch, the Spaniards beheld a spectacle such as they would have thought incredible outside Books of Chivalry or the Arabian tales of which they had heard. The hall was ablaze with gold and precious stones which generously gave back manifold glowing fires for every ray of light the torch let fall on them. Tiers upon tiers of long, polished wooden shelves carried serried ranks of small gold-ingots ; others looked like museum cabinets in which every animal of the sea, the air or the land known to the Mexicans was to be found imitated, with perfect craftsmanship, in gold and precious stones. There were shelves on which emeralds, rubies, turquoises and chalchihuitls were heaped like pebbles or grains of maize ; while in deep spacious cupboards below, rows upon rows of cotton garments were stored. Jewels of all shapes and uses were aligned in rising tiers, ingots, ear and nosepieces, bracelets, ankle-bracelets, necklaces, long lip-pieces, diadems of scintillating stones, crowned with rows of silky bright feathers which competed with the jewels in colour, iridescence and radiance under the quivering flame of the torch.

Yáñez's arm trembled and all eyes and hearts were tense with excitement. So that was the treasure ! Not one of the men there had ever seen such a thing—not even in his dreams. The news had oozed out and by groups of two and three, soldiers stole in, tiptoeing as if they were entering a church in the middle of a mass. A whisper, an explanation, a gesture of intelligence and another mouth gaped in admiration, two more eyes were fascinated by the glittering temptation of the dæmon of wealth and worldly power. Cortés smiled. He feigned not to see what was going on, how the whole army was passing under the treatment which he wished it to undergo, being goaded into boldness, spurred to action by the insinuating tempter, the golden serpent with emerald eyes. Dawn was breaking when in a cool, self-mastered voice, he gave orders to keep the discovery secret and to have the door walled up and stuccoed at once.

And so the golden serpent with emerald eyes was caged up again ; but its spirit was abroad.

2

While these events were taking place in the palace of his father Axayacatl, Moteczuma was in conference with his brother Cuitláhuac, ruler of Iztapalapa, and with his nephew Cacama, King of Tetzcuco. Cacama was in a defiant and resentful mood. "I told you, sir," he argued. "I always told you that these strangers had nothing divine about them. Just men. Now you have the proof of it. This man, for

he is only a man," he asserted passionately, feeling the doubts which lingered behind the silence of his two uncles, "this man has just married my sister under our very noses." Moteczuma had heard the news with feelings of ordinary jealousy as a man, but also of deep dismay as a monarch. The strangers had come to stay. No mere embassy, as their leader kept assiduously explaining. And that Alonso, too . . . How quickly he had discovered and picked the loveliest rose in the Aztec garden ! Moteczuma felt the thorn in his heart. Something divine there must be about it, despite what young Cacama said, for it was long since Xuchitl had announced to him that she was in love with the Quetzalcoatl man. "What do you propose, then ?" he asked Cacama. "That we should fall upon them and destroy them. We are more numerous." Moteczuma turned to his brother, who frowned and, with a significant glance at Cacama, remarked : "I was always against letting them come so far. These . . . beings are not men . . . not as we understand that word, anyhow. We shall not be able to do much against them. They have a magic goddess with a baby in her arms, who makes them invincible and points out to them where they are to strike." Moteczuma confirmed this statement. "Their chief had the effrontery to request that I should put this magic woman in a chapel next to that of Witchilopochtli in our main temple." "And did you agree ?" asked Cacama contemptuously, expecting an affirmative answer. "No," answered Moteczuma, to his nephew's surprise and relief. "Witchilopochtli knows what disasters he would have rained upon us, if I had. But all the same, the Magic Lady is as powerful as Witchilopochtli. I am certain of that. And I have been expecting some disaster ever since."

He looked up. Petalcalcatl, like a shadow, stood erect and silent at the door. "Yes ?" Moteczuma asked. "My lord, a courier from the Lord Quauhpopoca, Governor of the Coast." Moteczuma nodded assent and a man straight from the coast entered the hall and squatted before the emperor. To the right and left of Moteczuma stood Cacama and Cuitlahuac poorly dressed and barefoot. "Lord, my Lord, Great Lord, Quauhpopoca sends his respects, and reports that in order to serve you he drew the Strangers into an ambush and killed their captain and many more men. Here is the picture," and he offered a painted cloth, "and here is a head." A second man came forward from the dark background and presented a tray with the head of a black-bearded, robust, somewhat fierce Spanish soldier.

The courier expected a high reward, for the news was excellent, or so it seemed to him. The Spanish settlement in Veracruz had sustained a heavy defeat. Moteczuma struck his gong. "Petalcalcatl, have this man sacrificed to Witchilopochtli at dawn without fail." The second man stood there, trembling, with his gruesome

tray in his shaking hands. "Petalcalcatl, I don't want this head in here. Have it offered to a provincial temple. Take it away. Quick."

The three monarchs remained alone. Moteczuma passed his hand over his sweating brow. "Madness!" he exclaimed. "Sheer madness." Cacama could not understand. "Why did you see it as an event of ill-omen?" he asked. For him the death of all those Spaniards was good news, which deserved a rich award, not death for the courier. "Madness," Moteczuma repeated; "Witchilopochtli knows what the White Chief will now claim. As if the situation was not difficult enough already." He called Petalcalcatl again. "Petalcalcatl, tell me, have I daughters of age and pretty enough? I want to make a present to . . . an exceptionally powerful person." Petalcalcatl thought it over. "I can think of three: Ayacyuan, Celic and Metzli." "Who do you think the best?" Petalcalcatl was silent for a while. "My Lord, they are just like their names: Metzli is a Moon, quiet and subdued when the Sun is there, but shining in his absence; Celic is like a fresh and tender plant; and Ayacyuan is incomparable." Moteczuma who knew none of them, said: "Have Ayacyuan ready for to-morrow morning, when the White Chief comes for his usual visit. Who is her mother?" Petalcalcatl was caught out. "I will find out, sir."

Cacama had listened in disgust. Was the Emperor of Anahuac buying off the strangers by offering them his own daughters? As soon as Petalcalcatl left the room, he asked leave to return to Tetzcuco. "Are you in a hurry?" asked the Emperor. "Why should I stay any longer?" asked Cacama. "I want to know whether there is any truth in a rumour I have heard," said Moteczuma. "Cuiclahuac, you may leave us." Having dismissed his brother, he turned to his nephew. "I hear that your father owned a magic jewel which enabled him to triumph over every woman he wanted." Cacama glanced daggers at him in the relative darkness of the room. "So! That is what he was thinking about!" And aloud: "I dare say. I have never seen it." Moteczuma could hardly believe it, though in point of fact it was true. "But had you heard the rumour?" he insisted. "Yes. I had. It was, I believe, a heart of jade." "Where is it now?" Moteczuma asked. "I don't know," he answered, with a dry, impatient voice, yet truthfully. "You may go," Moteczuma dismissed him, offended at his lack of sympathy.

3

The Emperor called his steward again. "Tell me exactly where Xuchitl has been housed." The Chief Steward produced a cloth in which the Palace of Axayacatl was painted, both in plan and in elevation. "Here," he said. "All these rooms. Access is through this corridor. Also possible through the terrace." But Moteczuma was not listening. A malicious smile twisted his thin long lips. "Is the old builder there?" "Yes, my Lord." "Show him in."

An old man entered the room, hesitatingly and sideways, as Moteczuma's stiff etiquette exacted. He was bent forward by age, had white hair and a thin, sparse, yet long beard, the hairs of which could be counted. He was poorly clad in a rough henequen wrap and barefoot. He wore no jewels. "Calciteltl," said the Emperor, "you were the builder who built my father's palace?" "Yes, my Lord." "Do you remember it well?" "Yes, my Lord. I could move about it blind-fold." "Even the secret passages?" The old man smiled. "There is a whole network of them. You can go from nearly everywhere to nearly everywhere by secret ways, within the walls—at least if you are not too fat!" he added, not without humour. "Look," said Moteczuma, and he spread the cloth over the red-and-gold leather cushion in front of him. The old man squatted. "Yes . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . A very good drawing . . . But . . . but . . . it is my own. I did it many, many years ago." The Emperor was pleased. "Could you draw here the lines of secret passages and the spots in the wainscots which I must press with my finger to pass through?" The old man studied the matter. "Yes. It would take some time, though—" The Emperor was never ready to listen to reason. "It must be ready by dawn. Here is some ink. I forbid you to use any other. Work here, in this room." He locked the old man in a closet near by. The ink was "magic." It showed only while the cloth was hot.

"Navalli," called the emperor, down a tube hidden in the wall. In the corner of the hall a trap was raised and an old woman appeared. She was his familiar *navalli* or witch, an old peasant woman recommended to him for her magic powers, on whom he had to fall back after sacrificing his magicians and soothsayers when they disagreed with him. She had sparse hair falling on her shoulders and wore a black huipilli with white moons. "What can you do to turn a man into a beast?" She squatted before him. "I need some hair."

"I will find you some," he said.

"Then it is easy. But it does not last long."

"How long?" asked the Emperor.

"One day or so."

"That is more than enough!" said the Emperor. "And a fish? Can you turn a man into a fish?"

"Yes. I will give you the recipe. Throw him into the lake before he has eaten anything in the morning. No one must see him. He is sure to become a fish. But he must have no food."

"Go," said the Emperor. She vanished.

"Petalcalcatl," said the Emperor on his way to his bedroom, "when the old man has finished his work, secure the painted cloth, and throw him into the lake. Give him no food. See he sees no one on the way. It is very important."

He went to bed and slept in peace.

4

The morning light brought back all his cares. The first thing he saw by his bedside was the cloth prepared for him by his architect. His breakfast was brought, hot, on a small portable brazier. He waited for his servant to leave, and passed the cloth over the flame. What a revelation! A regular network of passages between the walls of room and room, connected every part of the house with every other part. He finally spotted the passages which gave access to the rooms Xuchitl was then occupying. It was obvious that, should the occasion arise—suppose he ever chose to live in his father's palace—the apartments for him to choose would be those in the central court. The passage was easy and not very long from there to Xuchitl's rooms. Then he put the cloth away. It seemed to him that there were three parts to the scheme: he had to get Alonso out of the way; this could be done by transforming him into some beast, at any rate for a night or so, with the help of his witch; he had to secure easy access to his father's palace, which was now the headquarters of the Spaniards; and he had to appear to Xuchitl during the night, so that in her fright she should allow herself to be robbed of the Heart of Jade. Then, with the virtue of the Heart of Jade he would triumph over her.

He felt he needed it more than ever. Xuchitl had always been an obsession with him, ever since that first day when he had glanced right into her eyes, still radiant with the vision of splendour which shone on his wall. Her very resistance had increased her value in his eyes, for she embodied his only unattained aim, his only unfulfilled desire, since he had become an omnipotent monarch. But now she had been transfigured into a symbol as well. Xuchitl was the Empire of Anahuac which was slipping away from his trembling hands into those of the men of Quetzalcoatl. He had lost the first phase of the battle. Cortés

was in Mexico. Alonso had married Xuchitl. Moteczuma did not want to give up the fight. He had not made up his mind as to whether the White blond newcomers were men or gods, but whatever they were, he was anxious—yes, anxious rather than determined—to defend his position to the last.

So Tlaculteutl, the goddess of Carnal Love, whispered in his ear that his fight for Xuchitl was one with his fight for his crown and for the defence of Anahuac. And the solitary and voluptuous emperor brooded, at peace with himself, over the best way of taking back Xuchitl from her White husband. His scheme was good, but it had a flaw. He came out of his gorgeous tub of black shiny stone in which he had been steaming for the last ten minutes and went on meditating, self-absorbed, while his servant rubbed his lithe, copper-coloured body with a rough towel. "Yes, the difficult point was that it implied his staying at least one night in Axayacatl's palace, rather an odd occurrence and one difficult to explain. Unless he contrived to get himself invited by Cortés the White Chief and he accepted as a matter of courtesy. . . ."

He was now fully dressed. His astrologer entered the room. The Emperor had sat down on a simple ycpalli made of maguey-palm garnished with copper and had lit up his morning acayetl. He was himself very well versed in astrological matters. His astrologer was an old retired priest, wrinkled and punctured all over with thorn-scars. "Sir, the day does not seem to me very good. It is under the sign of knives. I see strife and a fall."

He smiled enigmatically. Who knew? He would strive and Xuchitl would fall.

5

"The White gods are coming," said Petalcalcatl. The Emperor dismissed his astrologer, threw his acayetl into a copal-brazier and went out of the room. It was his habit to receive the Spaniards in one of his state rooms, and with as much pomp as possible. That day, he chose the Hall of the Four Signs, a square room decorated with panels of feather-work within a framework of golden pillars, symbolising the four signs of the calendar—houses, reeds, knives and rabbits. The northern wall had a yellow background (yellow being the colour of drought), shot through with a volley of black obsidian knives. On top of the picture could be seen the dreaded image of Mictlantecuhitli, the god of Death and of the region without doors or windows. The west wall was painted on a green background. It was devoted to the sign of houses, several of which were painted on a landscape of green

vegetation over which rose the image of Coatlicue, the goddess of the Earth. The south, the side of the rabbits, i.e., of seething life, was red. It was overrun by rabbits, hardly less red than the background, and looked as if it had been embroidered at the cost of a hecatomb of parrots and cockatoos. It was presided over by a flaming image of Xiuhtecutli, the god of fire. Moteczuma had his majestic gold ycpalli set close to the eastern wall, that dedicated to the gods of wind and rain, Quetzalcoatl and Tlaloc, in a colour scheme based on blue and green.

Hardly had he sat down when the Spanish captains entered the room. The Emperor was at once struck by two facts—they were more numerous and they looked graver than usual. His heart sank and his thoughts went back to Quauhpopôca. "Malintzin," he said, "you know how desirous I am to please you and become your ally. So, in token of friendship, I want to offer you one of my own daughters." Petlcalcatl brought Ayacyuan by the hand. She was a pretty girl of about sixteen years of age. Cortés bowed low. "Sir, you will always show your generous heart. I will take care of your daughter"; and he handed the maiden to Doña Marina, who was present. His brow was still sombre. "But it would be better for both of us if these tokens of friendship were not belied by your Governors." Moteczuma's fears were confirmed. "I have news of the death of some of our men at the hands of your Coast Chief Calpixques. And as I am responsible to my Emperor for their lives, I must have this matter cleared up." Moteczuma undid a leather strap round his wrist and showed a jade seal which he wore hidden between the leather and his wrist. "Petlcalcatl, give my seal to one of your men. Let him start at once and bring here Quauhpopoca and all the men he may think implicated."

Cortés bowed low again, while a murmur of approval passed through the ranks of the Spaniards. Cortés, however was not placated yet. He did not want to be. The Quauhpopoca episode was for him but a welcome pretext. His chief aim was to seize the Emperor. "I thank you, sir. But till your Governor comes, it is imperative I should be able to answer to my King whatever betide. So, you must come, and settle in your father's palace with us."

The Emperor's eyes were wide with astonishment. What! Did the White Stranger dare suggest that he should go and live as the prisoner of his guests? But, while this stream of indignation flowed visibly and openly in his dark soul, another stream ran hidden in the opposite direction. "That is exactly what I was waiting for, to spend my nights under the same roof as Xuchitl." He felt this under-stream and enjoyed it with a sweet voluptuousness; but gave vent to nothing but the upper and open stream of his offended dignity. "I am no person

to be treated in such a manner," he said, with cutting, icy contempt. The Spaniards behind Cortés grew defiant when they heard Doña Marina translate the answer and saw the Emperor's offended face. "Sir, you shall be in complete freedom, have your establishment, your household, your rank. We shall respect you as the great monarch of these lands. But you must come." He remained adamant. So did Cortés. He offered his three legitimate children as hostages. Cortés refused them. He stood his ground, yet every now and then he grew silent and the Spaniards seemed to read a certain softening of his resistance in the otherwise hard features of his face. They were the undercurrents which his sensuous hidden hope, the hope of being beaten and forced to live under Xuchitl's roof, insinuated in his heart. Then the sense of his own dignity returned, and he grew hard again. Suddenly the thick heavy voice of Velázquez de León resounded in the room. "Enough, sir," he shouted at Cortés. "Let him come or we shall run him through the body." A murmur of acquiescence ran through the captains and soldiers behind him. The Emperor was startled. He had never heard any one speak in that tone of voice in his presence. He glanced at Doña Marina for an explanation. The shrewd interpreter took upon herself to say: "Never mind what he said, sir. I know the lie of the land. I advise you to yield and hope for the best, for if you do not yield, it is the very worst which awaits you."

What was he to do? It was not his fault, was it? If he resisted, he would be done to death there and then; the town would rise and the White gods would no doubt destroy it by some supernatural trick. He was forced to move to his father's palace. He could not help it. At least, in the midst of his misery, he would have the consolation of going to live under Xuchitl's roof; and who knows? . . .

Two hours later, Moteczuma was being conveyed in his silver and gold litter across the streets of Tenochtitlán from his own palace, which he was never to see again, to the palace of his father Axayacatl then occupied by the Spaniards. The four noblemen who carried him shoulder high were weeping. He had released his mind from the anxieties of his official state and dreamt of nothing but Xuchitl.

6

Alonso and Xuchitl were having supper on the terrace of their apartments. "I do not like this change," said Xuchitl. "Moteczuma is stubborn and powerful and I feel too near him." Alonso was not impressed. "What can he do? He will be closely watched." But Xuchitl was nervous. "If you remained with me, I would fear nothing. But as you cannot . . ." The town was in a turmoil over Moteczuma's surrender. So far there had been few signs of it, but all reports which reached Alonso as Chief Constable of the Spanish Army were disquieting. Cacama, the King of Tetzcuco and Cuauhtemoc, Moteczuma's nephew, a spirited lad of eighteen, were the leaders of the popular indignation. Alonso had placed pickets of Spanish soldiers and of native auxiliaries in all the strategic points. He would have to spend the night on horseback.

"Alonso, do you believe that he could transform himself into some animal or suddenly pass through a wall?" He thought it over. "The devil can do anything. But I don't know whether he would do it for Moteczuma." He had that simple faith in the devil which like a shadow goes inseparably with the faith in God held by Christians.

"Then, imagine, if you were to leave me alone to-night and he suddenly appeared in my room through a panel in the wall . . ." He looked at her with his deep blue eyes. "I will leave you my best hound. He is trained to leap on any unknown person. You need not fear man or devil with him." He was not nervous at all, even though the mere thought of any risk she might undergo was unbearable to him. But he felt that his whole life had been flowing, though seemingly here and there, aimlessly, really towards her, and that now that the union had been achieved, it would bear fruit and was sure to be protected by God until it did. This was patent even in her face—the mere fact of her existence, her beauty of body and mind. What if their nest were tossed by the waves of war? Danger made it the more precious. He knew they would both have to go through difficult days, but he felt sure of the future. Whether it was his courage which straightened his faith or his faith his courage, he had not troubled to find out. They were like the two wings of his soul. "You know what I am thinking?" she said. "That if you became Emperor of Mexico instead of Moteczuma, we should all be much happier." He laughed heartily: "Why?" But she was grave: "Because it is far too slow to go about converting people one by one, as you have done with me. While if you were Emperor you would give orders from above and could transform life much more quickly." So, she also had found that conquest was a short-cut to conversion. "You know, Xuchitl," he

said, "our faith is more exacting than that of your people. It is far more difficult for us to live up to it. It is difficult enough for your people not to get drunk or steal; but it is far more difficult to love our enemy. How could I convert all Anahuac to loving their enemies? And even myself, if I loved Moteczuma would I leave you my hound to leap on him?" And Xuchitl answered, "If he came led by an evil spirit, the hound might help him to get rid of it. And in any case, you must chose between loving him and loving me." "That," said Alonso, "is a different kind of love." And they smiled into each other's eyes.

7

The Emperor whispered because the Spanish guards might overhear him and some of them knew a few words of *nauatl*. "Navalli, it must be to-night. Petalcalcatl will give you a lock of his hair. We bought it from one of his servants. You must turn him into an animal—as small as possible." Navalli, with her eyes on the Emperor's feet, asked, "Will a rat do?" And the Emperor, "Yes. You need not trouble to do it before midnight. But I should like him out of the way by then."

Navalli left the room. As she passed by the Spanish guards in the anteroom, one of them said: "I wonder who this old witch can be!" and another one answered: "The Steward told the Captain. She is Moteczuma's wet-nurse. He has remained faithful to her." "Rather decent of him," approved the first. "All the same," retorted a third soldier, "I don't like the look of her. Suppose she were a witch! She has no business to be anything else with that face! In my place, in Old Castille, she would get a free ride on a donkey, with a free dress of feathers and honey for the asking." The first one shivered. "It gives me the creeps to think she might be concocting some scheme with Moteczuma to turn us all into pigs or something." But the second one laughed. "Pigs? How could she turn us into pigs when there are no pigs in this country? They don't know what pigs are." This remark opened out such a vista on the abstruse question whether witches are limited by experience or not that the soldiers felt out of their depth and tacitly agreed to sublimate the argument into a game of dice.

Alonso brought his hound to Xuchitl and remained there while the animal took the air of the house and became familiarised with its objects and smell. He was not worried at all about Xuchitl's safety, but was deeply concerned about the state of the town, where the seizure of Moteczuma by the White Gods had stirred much ill feeling amongst the rich families, those who lived under the privileges granted by the imperial system to all brave men. This very fact contributed to his serenity on the score of Xuchitl's safety, for he could not imagine how Moteczuma could give any thought to his personal whims on such a night. He knew little or nothing about the tortuous soul of the Mexican Emperor and was too inexperienced to guess the net of secret corridors which connected his official cares and his personal pleasures.

He left Xuchitl in bed, with the hound lying peacefully at the foot of the couch ; and at the gates met his guard and his horse. They started into the night, every two men carrying a lantern, while Alonso himself had hung a lantern from the saddle of his white horse. They were accompanied by a small band of native scouts, commanded by Long Face. On Long Face's advice, they went first to the Calpulli, or Communal House. They found the slaves who were to die next day, in the ceremonies of the month of Quecholli, performing the rites prescribed for their last night. A few men and many women. All had already been shorn of their funeral lock by the priests. They were standing in a circle before a fire, burning their belongings : a small paper-flag, a wrap, their loin-cloth, their smoking reeds and even their earthenware drinking cups, all was thrown into the fire ; while the women threw their huipils and their spinning tools to the flames. Soon they would be dressed in funeral paper and taken to the bloody sacrificial stone. Alonso took in the dramatic scene, vividly illuminated by the flames, and then strolled to the halls and cloisters on the look-out for any sign of political disquiet. He found none.

He led his watch towards the edge of the lagoon. They covered their lanterns. Long Face and two of his men slipped into the water without explanations. The night was black. Alonso trusted his faithful Long Face and waited in silence. Presently, Long Face came back ; the water streamed from his body. " Let us go to Xoloc," he suggested. " I think it will be worth while." Alonso hesitated. " It is a bit far out, isn't it ? " Long Face explained. " I have overheard a conversation. Nothing to be expected here to-night. But in Xoloc the three princes Cuiclahuac, Cacama and Cauhtemoc are in conference." Alonso pricked up his ears. " To Xoloc," he said. And they took the Iztapalapan causeway.

9

Moteczuma was in bed but not asleep. The room in which he slept was spacious. It had been Axayacatl's own bedroom in the central court. The alcove was separated from the rest by folding doors, which like everything else in the palace, were richly decorated. Petalcalcatl was to sleep across these folding doors on Moteczuma's orders. But this was the Emperor's first night there, and things had not yet shaped into customs. Outside, beyond three curtains, the Spanish guards were posted. The Emperor's suite of apartments had no other outlet.

Shortly after midnight the Emperor rose from his bed, went towards the folded doors and touched Petalcalcatl's shoulder. The steward who was dozing, leapt to his feet. Moteczuma pointed at his bed. Petalcalcatl lay down on Moteczuma's bed and turned his face to the wall. There was no light other than the faint glimmer which rose from a copal brazier, at the other end of the long alcove.

Moteczuma tiptoed out of the alcove, out of the room, into the space, about three feet long, between the first and the second curtain. He was in the dark. He touched the wainscot with his soft, damp, sensitive hand, in search of the secret spot. He pressed three spots with three fingers—simultaneously. A door was open before him. He entered the dark corridor, and shut the door behind him. He found himself at first in absolute darkness; but he waited patiently till his eyes became attuned to the very faint light which reigned in that secret world and filtered in from a few cleverly contrived skylights. Presently, he was able to advance with the help of his hands and of this faint glimmer. The corridor was straight and he knew how many steps he was to count.

He now stood behind the silky cotton panel which faced Xuchitl's bed, with his hand on the buttons which would make the panel suddenly slide. He was shaking with tension. He forced himself to wait till he had mastered his agitation, then pressed three buttons. Softly, noiselessly, the cloth rolled itself up and the room appeared in every detail to his eyes now trained to the dark. He could see the door open on to the terrace, the brazier, almost out, in a corner; Xuchitl, sleeping peacefully, lying on her back with her arms outside the bed-clothes. She was not wearing the Heart of Jade. A fierce bark and a swift leap. Moteczuma's hand pressed the three buttons. The panel ran swiftly back into position and Moteczuma felt a hot breath and the paws of a long, light but powerful animal, searching his body in the dark.

He moved backwards. The tension seemed to slacken. Moteczuma was furious. "I had told her no bigger than a rat!" The hound was

uneasy in the dark. Moteczuma moved back. The hound followed him, uneasily, softly. Moteczuma wondered whether Alonso would follow him and bite him in the open or return to his wife. He reached the secret door close to his rooms and touched the three buttons. The door turned round silently. There was a reddish light outside. The hound slipped through the opening before Moteczuma.

He came out, shut the secret door, and pale with fear returned to his bed. Petalcalcatl was snoring peacefully. "Out, you dog!" he said. And he lay down, feigning to sleep.

10

The soldier who sat facing the curtain had the dice-holder in his hand, ready to throw. "What is the matter?" asked the man opposite him. He had remained struck dumb, with his arm in the air. The others turned round. "I told you she was a witch. She's turned Moteczuma into a hound so that he can escape. Get hold of the beast." They collared the dog. "Come on! It's the Moor, Don Alonso's hound!" "How do you know?" "See here, the white spot under the throat." "He looks like the Moor, but a witch can imitate anything. Let's go and see." They tiptoed into Moteczuma's own hall. The folding doors were closed. Petalcalcatl was lying across them. "Let us . . ." "No. Better not. We have been told we must respect the Emperor." "All very well. But we have also been told to see he does not escape." Another one butted in: "And if the dog is not Moteczuma, where does he come from?" That seemed pretty unanswerable.

Suddenly there was complete silence. The third, outer curtain had been lifted and the soldiers beheld the loved and respected features of their commander. "What's the matter?" asked Cortés. One of the men explained. Cortés had but little faith in witchcraft and smiled at the idea that the dog might be Moteczuma. "Are you sure he did not first enter through this door, and then come out again?" They looked at each other. The fact was that they were not sure, but it was dangerous to own it to their general. He needed no words. "Of course you are not. I see you were playing cards. That always means that watchmen watch less attentively than they should. Hold on to that dog, anyhow. And we shall see to-morrow."

II

Cortés went out pensively. He strolled here and there, in the palace and the grounds, keeping an eye on everything, sentinels, lights, movements on the lake. The fact was he did not like that dog incident. Witchcraft was all very well, but where was that dog before it came there? And if the men turned out to be right, how had it got there? Cortés was not thinking of secret passages, but of a second possible way out from the Emperor's apartments. He went round all the gates. As he arrived at the main gate, a man was alighting from a horse and handing the reins to the guard at the door. "Alonso!" "Sir, I am glad to find you so quickly. I have news for you." They walked together away from the soldiers. "I come from Xoloc. Cuitlahuac, Cacama and Cuauhtemoc are in conference. Long Face has managed to overhear. They are planning a revolt, with or if necessary against Moteczuma." Cortés was thinking hard and quick, his thumb in his beard. "I would gallop there with you now and give them a lesson. But, tell me, where did you leave your dog? The Moor, I mean." Alonso was dumbfounded. "On Xuchitl's bed. She was afraid of Moteczuma. I don't know whether you know, sir . . ." Cortés raised his hand. "I know, I know. That makes it the more imperative . . ." He cut off his sentence and in a tone of command: "Quick. To Moteczuma's room."

On the way Cortés told Alonso how the dog had turned up in Moteczuma's anteroom. Alonso was on fire longing to go first to Xuchitl's room, but he obeyed and followed the general. They passed the sentinels—and the dog—and entered the room. They woke up Petalcalcatl and made it obvious to him that they had to see the Emperor at once. Moteczuma came out of his alcove. Cortés was deeply relieved and without any preamble said coldly: "Sir, your three cousins, Cuitlahuac, Cacama and Cuauhtemoc are at this very moment conspiring against you in the town of Xoloc. What are your orders?" Moteczuma's eyes were on Alonso. He looked and looked and looked, convinced that he and the hound were one. Evidently this White god had beaten the witch. "I am waiting," said Cortés impatiently. "Ah, my cousins, bring them to me and I will punish them."

The Spaniards left the room. Cortés said to Alonso: "Go and see your wife. I will gallop straightway to Xoloc."

Alonso rushed across the palace to his wife's room, followed by his faithful hound. He found her praying on her knees, before a small image of the Virgin which Father Olmedo had given her, and for which she had made a tiny altar on a table in her bedroom. She flew to him and threw her arms round his neck. "I was asleep . . . well, I am not sure. I was perhaps awake or dreaming—that wall suddenly became a cave and there was a man in the cave, though I could not see him at all ; but I was sure the man was in the cave . . . you know one is always sure in one's dreams . . . and suddenly, the Moor barked furiously and leapt into the cave." He was so relieved. The dog, the wall, yes, that was a mystery to be solved later. But here she was. The dog entered the room. Xuchitl was astonished. "Here he is ! " "Yes. He came with me," said Alonso. "He was found in Moteczuma's apartments by our soldiers." Xuchitl was even more astonished. "I see. Moteczuma came and took him away just to see whether he could do it, and try with me later . . ." Alonso had not thought of that. "Take the dog away . . . but how ? " No. He did not see things that way. The dog must have strayed out of the room. "What did you do after . . . after you heard the bark ? " "I could not sleep. I got up and came here to pray so as to keep ghosts and dangerous spirits away."

Alonso was most perturbed. "So, you did not see the dog ? " Xuchitl was surprised at the question. "How could I ? He had taken it away. I am sure of that." "But," he argued, "you say you were probably asleep, in a dream." She glanced at him lovingly : "Yes, of course. But . . . it was in my dreams that I saw you first." This brought back his anxiety. He had discovered no way of access to Moteczuma's apartments other than that which the soldiers guarded ; and the dog had been found in Moteczuma's apartments and Moteczuma had obviously been in the room. He had diabolic powers, that seemed certain, and therefore it was he who had taken the dog away.

All the same, Alonso decided to have permanent Spanish sentinels posted at all the accesses to his apartments.

Cortés rode with Sandoval, the youngest and the ablest of his captains, towards Xoloc. They went fast at first while in the city, but had to slow down when they found themselves on the Iztapalapan causeway with water right and left, lapping gently, rocking idle canoes beyond which now and then one glided ahead with a man on board,

therefore with a definite purpose—vegetables for the market, a message for Moteczuma, a victim for the teocalli, a spy—the mantle of the night protected all, impartially. About a stone's throw from the fortress, which cut across the causeway, they were met by Alonso's sergeant. Though it was dark, the silvery stardust sufficed for him to recognise Cortés's gait and silhouette. "Sir, Long Face has found a way in. Not very easy, but it can be done." Cortés asked: "Why, man, isn't there a main door and stair?" The sergeant answered: "Yes, sir, of course." "Well, then, that is the only one good enough for me. Where is Long Face?" Long Face's knowledge of Spanish had already been "officially" recognised. He acted as an interpreter when necessary. The two Spanish captains with Long Face at their side and the escort of Spanish soldiers behind them entered the fortress, which was not defended, indeed not even closed. Cacama had called them together. Cuauhtemoc, a nephew of Moteczuma's, a youth of eighteen, was Cacama's main standby in his efforts to galvanise an opposition against Moteczuma's weak tactics. Cuitlahuac, an older man, took up a middle line. "I am ashamed of the Emperor," said Cacama. They were sitting on low matting seats in the central hall of the fortress, overlooking the causeway. "He has become the wife of the White Chief. He is convinced that the Whites are gods. Yet he has seen more than one White head on a platter, and Quauhpopoca has just sent him another one." Cuitlahuac shook his head. "That may still cost us trouble."

"Why?" asked the impetuous Cuauhtemoc. "Let us call up our warriors and we shall beat those pale dogs in a day and have a regular feast on their bodies the same night." The three leaders discussed the details of a conspiracy to force Moteczuma's hand. They were in the midst of their discussion when they heard heavy steps just outside. The curtain was pulled aside by a vigorous hand, and their astonished eyes beheld Cortés standing in the forefront of a group of soldiers.

"Good-night, my lords. I was passing . . . keeping an eye on things, you know . . . and overheard your conversation . . . so I thought I might offer you my escort to return to Tenochtitlán." The three Mexicans were somewhat put out by this irony, a little remote for them. "I do not intend to return," said Cuitlahuac, who lived in his city of Iztapalapa, on the other side of Xoloc. But Cortés, staring at him, retorted: "You will not throw away this opportunity to come to Tenochtitlán in my company!" Then, to the three: "My lords, I would be sorry if you were to misunderstand me. I mean to be your friend. I want you to help me to make this kingdom a happy country under the law and banner of my King-Emperor." Cacama was furious. "There is no emperor but Moteczuma," he said defiantly. Cortés stared at him. Cacama withstood the stare. Cortés said good-

humouredly : " My lord, do not be foolish. Moteczuma is the first to recognise that these lands belong to my Sovereign, Charles, King of Spain. Be wise and do not provoke me to use my authority." " You have no authority ! " exclaimed Cuauhtemoc with passion. " Young man, I shall show you soon that I have as much authority as a man can wield—that of the law and that of the sword."

There was a silence ; then Cortés, with the urbanity of a courtier, bowed and suavely but firmly ordered : " My lords, to Tenochtitlán . . . with me. Right now." And with a courtly gesture of his right hand he showed them the door.

The three princes filed out of the room. Their litters waited outside. Sandoval rode in front. Cortés rode behind. The soldiers marched on both sides. The mantle of the night covered them all impartially.

14

The emperor was becoming accustomed to his confinement. His habits were respected, his dignity upheld. He received his calpixques, priests and magistrates with the same ceremonial as usual and had all his women about. Since the dog incident, a Spanish sentinel had been posted in his own room. He had often by him also a youth named Ortega and nicknamed Orteguilla, who knew enough Nauatl to serve him as an interpreter.

" Orteguilla," said the emperor, " ask the sentinel his name." " I know it, sir. His name is Esquivel." " Ask him whether he thinks that his Chief Constable is a magician." Orteguilla put the question to Esquivel. He was used to it, for Moteczuma had been asking it of all the sentinels he had had in his room since the day the dog had leapt at him. So far the only tangible effect of these tactics had been one he neither wished nor expected : that of giving Alonso the reputation of being a sorcerer. This time, however, his question fell on readier ears. " Why does he ask that ? " asked Esquivel, startled. " I don't know," answered Orteguilla. Esquivel pondered over the matter. " Tell him I don't know, but I do know he owns a magic jewel." Orteguilla translated. Moteczuma was deeply interested, and therefore feigned indifference and waited for a while in silence. As he had expected, Esquivel hastened to fill up the gap of the silence, and through Orteguilla explained how that magic jewel was a chalchihuitl cut in the shape of a heart and (so Esquivel understood its powers) that it had the virtue of winning over the love of any woman its wearer wished to possess.

The emperor pulled at his acayetl with the utmost coolness and seemed to be entirely absorbed in producing rings of blue smoke. A

long time went by in silence. "Orteguilla," said Moteczuma, "go to see Malintzin and tell him that I wish to talk to him this afternoon." The page left the room. As soon as he was gone, Moteczuma struck his gong and asked for paper, colours and brushes. He was a fairly good painter-scribe. He painted a yellow-bearded, pink-faced man wearing on his chest a green-coloured heart and round his neck a yellow line which might be interpreted as a fair image of a golden chain. Then he signalled Esquivel and with a dumbshow clear enough to both emperor and soldier, carried on a conversation to the effect that if Esquivel procured the Heart of Jade for Moteczuma, Moteczuma would give Esquivel a purse of gold. Esquivel signified his approval of this deal by taking off his helmet and bowing three times before the bountiful majesty of the Emperor of Anahuac.

15

One morning a line of brilliantly clad strangers arrived before the palace. They were the suite of the Lord Quauhpopoca, Governor of the northern coast. The governor himself was conveyed in a litter. He alighted, doffed his gorgeous mantle and his crest of feathers and took from his slaves' hands a poor, worn-out wrap of henequen cloth with which to appear before the emperor. He left his rich sandals with the gate-keeper and, like a beggar or a thief, stole in sideways.

Moteczuma received him with a frown. "Why did you do that?" he asked brusquely. "I did it in your service. You wanted White heads for your magic operations. You had told me so yourself." Moteczuma was mollified. "You know, I believe we are under a bad spell. Everythings goes as the Pale Faces wish. The Lord Witchilopochtli has ordered me to accept the hospitality of the White God. I must for the time being please him in everything he asks. Our gods are most definite about that. They repeat it to me every night as soon as I go to sleep." Quauhpopoca said nothing. He did not like the position and was not sure Moteczuma interpreted the gods aright. The emperor went on: "The White God is in a fit of anger. When these White Gods get angry, they always exact human sacrifices. So you must be ready and your son and the fifteen men you have brought with you. I may have to offer you all to him." Quauhpopoca said nothing. It was the most matter-of-course thing that could happen to a man—to be sacrificed to the gods, whether White or turquoise-masked.

Cortés and Alonso had been visiting the teocalli opposite the Spanish headquarters. It was one of the two biggest temples in the town. Opposite the main chapel, about an arrow-shot away, they found the sacred ossuary where the skulls and cross-bones of the victims sacrificed to the gods were stored. It was bounded by two towers made of skulls and cement, between which a line of wooden props supported rows of poles, each holding five skulls transfixed through the temples, and arranged in such perfect order that it gave the gruesome spectacle the unexpected attractiveness which a naturally decorative arrangement inevitably produces—for such is the value of order that it bestows beauty on even the most repulsive material. Cortés and Alonso reckoned that there were one hundred and sixty thousand skulls stored in that ossuary, an impressive testimony to the subservience and fidelity of men to the gods of their own creation. But they came later upon another sight which brought them back from the heaven and hell of religious philosophy to the hard earth of military expediency. Close to the ossuary, Alonso and his chief discovered an arsenal no less neatly arranged. Bows, arrows, long two-handed swords made of wood with edges of murderous obsidian, spears, bucklers of leather and metal, all the weapons familiar to the Mexicans, were accumulated in regular rows sufficient to arm a force incomparably stronger than that of the Spaniards.

"You know what I am thinking?" asked Cortés. "This arsenal makes me think of Quauhpopoca. He has been found guilty by our court martial, and though I have no doubt that the real villain is Moteczuma, I must make an example of him. Now my trouble is that these Mexicans are so used to death that it is difficult to impress them. I was thinking of having Quauhpopoca and his accomplices burnt. Here is the stake," and with a wave of his hand he pointed towards the rows and rows of wooden armament which it was his purpose to destroy. "Two birds with one stone."

Esquivel was waiting in a quiet corner of the main court with his eyes on the door which led to the new wing—that in which Alonso lived. His face grew brighter. The man he was waiting for had suddenly come out from under the dark arched way to the light of the patio. He was a black-haired, black-eyed soldier, young and swift.

"Here, Ramirez. One word," said Esquivel, and he took his comrade aside.

It was a picturesque world. The arched way round the big yard had been divided into separate compartments by hangings made of tent-cloth, cotton or henequen-wraps and every other possible contrivance not excluding heavy wooden trunks, huipils and shirts hung out to dry. Each of these compartments was the establishment or home of a Spanish soldier, in which he lived with his women (one or more Indian concubines and a few grey-haired housewives) and with his *naborias* or native men-servants. Kitchen, bedroom, arms-store, the compartment was a reflection of its owner: some were neat and orderly, others were as repulsive as pigsties. Women came and went with hens, vegetables, rabbits or dogs for food; a groom would now and then pass with a horse which needed shoeing, on his way to the forge at the far end of the court; native peasants came to offer food or other wares and possibly to have a look around and report to Cacama; and now and then, over the general bustle and murmur of voices there would rise the strident trebles of a feminine discord or the shrill commanding notes of a trumpet.

Esquivel took Ramirez away from this turmoil, not to his own establishment, but round the corner to the back of the sacred mound. He explained to him that for some mysterious reason he was in a position to offer him one hundred pesos of gold for the Heart of Jade usually worn by Alonso or "Doña Suchil." "Have you ever seen it?" asked Ramirez with well-feigned unconcern. "No. But I know they wear it," answered Esquivel. That "No" was all Ramirez wanted to hear. He bargained for a while and closed the deal with a few shrewd words which might mean more than they said: "I promise nothing, but I will do my best."

Ramirez left Esquivel and went to the market. He felt the lure of jewels as keenly as any southerner, and he was an Andalusian. He knew by heart every jewel-shop in the Tianguizco. He explored them all again, carefully and conscientiously, and found that a jade-stone in the shape of a heart which was on sale in one of them would do perfectly for his purpose. He asked the jeweller how much he wanted for it. The man showed him a leather purse. He meant that he wanted one thousand cocoa almonds for it. Ramirez was unperturbed. He knew a public cocoa store which, carefully guarded though it was, was by no means inaccessible to a White God. He repaired to the cocoa store with a letter in Spanish, which he wrote himself, in which he did not even take the trouble to refer to cocoa at all. Letters, no matter their actual contents, were held in high respect by the natives as magic objects, since they actually conveyed messages the effectiveness of which they had often been able to observe. On the strength of the

letter, the guards allowed Ramírez to take as many almonds as he wished. He paid for the heart of jade and kept it carefully concealed till enough time had elapsed to venture upon the next stage of his transaction.

18

One morning the central square under Moteczuma's windows was seen covered by a huge stack of all the arms in the teocalli arsenal. The whole night long hundreds of flamemes had been at work carrying the bows, arrows, spears and bucklers and swords to the heap, most scientifically built with hollow spaces here and there to act as chimneys and quicken the progress of the flames. In the afternoon the flames were already beginning to show their quivering tongues through some of these chimneys. Behind the stack a flight of steps had been built. Quauhpopoca, his son and his fifteen friends were brought to the pyre. They were perfectly self-possessed. They required no help and went up the ladder to the appointed stakes to which they were to be tied, with a firm step, a proud mien and such noble serenity that the Spanish captains and soldiers who surrounded the fire were struck with admiration. The man who had contrived this way of striking terror at the heart of the people he had conquered was just then putting the finishing touch to his dramatic action: he was reminding Moteczuma of the emperor's own responsibility: "I am punishing Quauhpopoca, but I know you are the culprit," he asserted in no soft tones. Moteczuma, awe-struck at the mere fact of being so addressed, glanced now at Cortés, now at a soldier who, behind Cortés, held in his hand an object which put terror into the unfortunate emperor's heart. The soldier knelt before the emperor of Anahuac and locked his feet inside heavy irons. Cortés left the room, while the emperor, dejected, now looked at his feet in irons, now raised his eyes to the window through which he could see the flames of his burning arsenal consuming the life of seventeen of his best warriors.

Out in the square Cortés at the head of his captains watched the flames for long, motionless and apparently unmoved. He was still wondering over his bloodless victory, feeling no man could have achieved it without divine help and trying to adjust his deeds to his belief. Yes. This sacrifice was necessary. The pagan faith must go soon. He had to beat it quickly at whatever cost, by example and energy. And then, the new world would be like the old—by no means blameless but at least ready to receive the law of Christ.

The flames were dying down. He thought of the emperor whom he had humiliated. Moteczuma's ordeal should end and he, Cortés, in person must try to heal the wound he had caused. He went back

to the emperor's rooms followed by all his captains, knelt before the afflicted monarch and freed his feet. Then he stood up, bowed and put his arms round the emperor's neck. "Tell him," he said to Alonso, "that I shall always be his friend." Alonso translated these soothing words, but as he heard them, the emperor felt the tears flood his dejected eyes.

19

Alonso went to his rooms in a state of deep unrest. He had been moved to the marrow by the scene of Moteczuma's humiliation. He felt, moreover, subtly linked to the native race since his marriage. When he came before Xuchitl, he was ashamed. It was a spontaneous feeling, without any foundation of reason. It just was. "Quauhpopoca died like a man and you can be proud of him," he said to his wife. Xuchitl opened wide her clear, intelligent eyes. Why should she be proud of Quauhpopoca? Who was Quauhpopoca to her? "I have never seen him in my life," she remarked by way of explaining to herself and to him why she was not interested. "You know," she added, "if he had played that trick on Moteczuma himself, his punishment would have been far more severe. But I am sorry he was burnt and not killed in a less public manner."

"Why?" he asked. "Because it will strike them almost as familiar. You see, just one month before you came, they were celebrating the festivals of Xocotlvetzi, when they throw slaves on a huge fire till they are half burnt. They throw their bodies on top of the fire, and the crowd shout as they see the burning dust of ashes and incense rise in the air; and when they are half burnt, but still alive, they hook them out of the fire and lay them on the sacrificial stone for . . . the usual thing."

20

This episode finally shattered whatever power of resistance Moteczuma had kept against the Whites. His will was broken and he sought every possible way of reconquering it, in fact, of surviving. For the time being, his only comforts were his self-suggested conviction that in submitting to Cortés he was merely following the explicit desires of his gods, and some hope of stealing Xuchitl back from Alonso with the help of the Heart of Jade.

After a long and pathetic discussion he had bowed to Cortés' desire to have the authority and sovereignty of the King of Spain formally recognised by the Emperor of Anahuac and by all his chief dignitaries. Moteczuma had wrung from the majority of his notables their

assent to this extraordinary measure. They had given it reluctantly, in deference to the long-standing tradition of respect for the emperor and to their belief in the prophecies on the coming of Quetzalcoatl.

It was a colourful, dramatic and moving ceremony. Moteczuma was surrounded by most of his notables, dignitaries, high priests and chief-warriors, dressed in the regalia of their respective functions. Feathers of all colours, gold and precious stones, shone against the background of swarthy faces and jet-black eyes of the lesser members of the audience allowed to share in the spectacle. The Spaniards surrounded their chief—all steel-jacketed, holding their helmets in their right hand, their left resting on the cross of their swords; long-haired and bearded, most of them fair or red in colour; of a bigger build but no prouder in their bearing than the unhappy Mexicans who were ready to hand their liberty over to them and who looked the stiffer and the haughtier for their inner misery.

Delusion pitted against delusion. That day saw a Tragedy of Errors staged on the scene of history. Moteczuma gave away his country because he thought Cortés was Quetzalcoatl or one of his men. Cortés insisted on receiving Moteczuma's official resignation of sovereignty because he was a Christian, a member of the shadowy Roman Empire (Roman of the Emperor and Roman of the Pope) and did not feel justified in merely conquering by the sword what the letter of the law had not first granted him.

Moteczuma made a speech in a melancholy voice, often broken at times to allow his emotion to calm down and let him recover his breath. "You all know," he said, "that we are not the true masters of this land and that we owe it to its true master Quetzalcoatl. Here is Quetzalcoatl's man. He must henceforward be your ruler." Cortés made his notary take down Moteczuma's formal recognition of the King-Emperor of Spain as his legal sovereign, while big tears rolled down the grave faces of Moteczuma's warriors. The sturdy, hard conquerors felt their hearts moved and by a miracle of the oneness of mankind, their stony, dry souls were for once refreshed by the dew of love.

There was one man, one man only in the hall, whose emotion was more complex than that of any other, for in it were blended the misery of the Mexicans and the compassion of the Spaniards. Alonso's heart had been feeling of late more and more in communion with the conquered people. It was a consequence of his marriage, the more remarkable for the fact that his wife's usual, conscious attitude was by no means favourable to her own people. When she had adopted the

faith of Christ and married a Spaniard, Xuchitl had felt as if her soul had at last attained the freedom for which not only she but even her father had sighed for so long. Yes. With all their faults, their greed, these White men thought and acted in a world free from the dark influences of the omens and the caprices of the grinning gods which had made her life—and her father's—a nightmare. She had gone over to the Whites heart and soul. She felt in complete communion with them and longed for their speedy triumph. Alonso always found her uncompromisingly on the side of Cortés and his policy, even if critical on points of detail. Alonso's growing sympathy towards the Mexican side was therefore the more myserious. What was it which made him instinctively, if not altogether side with them, at least sorrow with them and feel their losses almost as if they were his own?

Thus ran his thoughts as Moteczuma's men brought and dumped on the centre of the hall load upon load of gold and jewels. As a token of his allegiance, the emperor was putting in Cortés' hands the treasure of his father Axayacatl which the Spaniards had visited one night under the quivering light of the carpenter's torch. Now, in that brilliant room flooded with sunlight, the feathers, the gold, the precious stones shone with unrivalled splendour. Years, ages of craftsmanship were piled on the floor as booty for the new masters. Alonso, who had never quite shaken off his repugnance for gold, looked on with pity for the gainers as well as for the losers of the yellow metal, the metal of bilious envy which makes men's souls stray from loyalty and men's minds swerve from truth.

When the ceremony was over the King's Treasurer Mexia remained for hours weighing the pieces to calculate the royal fifth. A strong guard watched over the operations. When Moteczuma arrived in his private apartments, he found Esquivel on duty. The soldier eyed him significantly. Moteczuma sent away his suite. Esquivel had his hand tight-closed. He stretched it out towards the Emperor and opened it. Moteczuma saw the Heart of Jade in Esquivel's palm. His nostrils trembled as he seized the gem with his nervous fingers. "How strange," he thought. "That I should win this on the very day I lost that!" And mentally he thanked Witchilopochtli.

A few days elapsed during which Moteczuma settled down to enjoy his position as the domesticated emperor of the true master of Anahuac, who henceforward was Cortés. His games, his women, his shooting expeditions, his hunchbacks, his acayetl now and then spiced with opiates or dreaming drugs—and rest. But there was no rest. Cortés

came one day to report to him that Cacama was again conspiring against them both. "Give me your troops," suggested Cortés, "and I will bring him to you in chains." But Moteczuma preferred less spectacular methods. "Malintzin," he answered, "leave him to me. In three days at most I will deliver him to you." He had tried his best to induce Cacama to accept the situation, but the spirited King of Tetzcuco refused to listen to his advice. Moteczuma found him a troublesome young man. The crafty emperor had always kept a number of Tetzcucoans in his service, attached to him by secret favours. He invited Cacama to a parley with some of his emissaries in a house which Cacama owned on the water, close to Tetzcuco. The house was built on piles. During the early part of the night, the space under the house had been filled with canoes manned by Moteczuma's trusted troops. While the conference was in progress, in the still of night, a trap-door which covered a flight of steps going down to the water, was suddenly raised from underneath behind Cacama, and several warriors broke into the room. The young king was overpowered and conveyed down the steps to a canoe which swiftly and quietly removed him to Tenochtitlán.

The next day, towards the evening, Alonso arrived in his apartments. "Xuchitl," he said to his wife, "your brother Cacama is a prisoner of our general." She was silent for a moment. "When will he be burnt?" she asked with a trembling voice. "Burnt? No. He is not going to be burnt. Nor even put to death. He will remain in chains. That is all." She felt tears in her eyes. Why? She did not know. Perhaps the memory of her father, of her talks with King Nezawal Pilli and her three brothers about the gods and the stars, memories stronger than his recent callous behaviour towards her. "It will be worse than death for him," she pointed out. And after a moment's reflection she added, "It must be so."

23

Esquivel did not hide his gold so well but that some of his neighbours noticed it. A few days after Moteczuma had rewarded him for the heart of jade, Mexia, the King's Treasurer, happened to be visiting the men's quarters to remind them of their obligation to report any gold they might have secured either by barter or as a present, and to surrender the royal fifth. The Treasurer stopped for some time before Esquivel's archway. "You look as if you had a lot of gold," he said, for he had had a straight hint on the matter. Esquivel did not seem to appreciate the jest at all. "No, sir. I have nothing for which I need answer to you." Mexia noticed the quibble in the answer. "That

remains to be seen," he retorted, and he stepped with a commanding foot into Esquivel's premises. The soldier frowned. There were two young native women about. "What are you looking at them for? They were left me because they were not pretty. Otherwise they would have gone to some captain's quarters," he said peevishly. "Gold also is to be found in captains' quarters, not in soldiers' bunks. Ask Captain Velázquez de León, for instance. . . ." He went on grumbling behind Mexía who, paying no attention to him, outwardly at any rate, for he did not fail to make a mental note of the hint about the captain, went on searching the place with his eager eyes. He was used to this kind of work. In the darkest corner of the square space which was Esquivel's abode, a kind of kitchen had been set aside, and behind the cooking utensils, a heap of maize lying on the stone slabs. The Treasurer thrust his sword through the maize in several directions. "Hallo. Rather a big hen here!" he exclaimed. He plunged his hand into the heap and brought out a heavy leather purse full of gold nuggets. Esquivel was in a rage. He seized the leather purse and wrenched it from Mexía's hand. Mexía drew. "In the name of the king!" he shouted. A sergeant came forward and a couple of soldiers on duty. "Take this man and fetch me the Chief Constable." The sergeant beckoned to one of the soldiers, who left in haste, while he and the other soldier held Esquivel. Presently Alonso arrived on the spot. "Sir Chief Constable, this man has made bold to resist me by force while I was performing my duty by the King our Lord."

Once again Alonso found Esquivel on his path. "How did you come by that gold?" Esquivel was not ready with a lie. "The emperor gave it to me." Alonso was astounded. The emperor had never been so lavish with any one, with the sole exception of Cortés. He doubted Esquivel's word and feared the gold had been stolen. He turned to Mexía and asked: "Sir Treasurer, what does Your Mercy want me to do?" Mexía answered: "I will keep the gold, weigh it and hand it over to the general, who will decide. Meanwhile you must keep this man in irons."

The treasurer went his way. Alonso turned to Esquivel and asked: "When are you going to let me leave you in peace?" Esquivel shot one of his hot, angry glances at his lifelong enemy: "Where are the irons? Let us waste no breath in words."

The coveted Heart of Jade was Moteczuma's only consolation after the day in which he had put his crown at the feet of the White God. He wore it often and played with it wistfully, wondering how to bring Xuchitl within range so that he could try the magic powers of the jewel on her. Cortés was anxious to provide entertainment for him, for he realised that the emperor had kept intact his powers over his people (though he did not realise that these powers were more magical than political) and wanted to be given time to mature his hold over the country. Meanwhile, fully aware of the peril in which he might find himself in a city surrounded with water, he had built two sailing sloops, whose grace, speed and size awoke the deepest admiration among the Mexicans. He invited Moteczuma to sail in one of them, and the emperor asked to be conveyed to a rock island in the lake, one of his shooting preserves. Cortés was glad to acquiesce in this harmless whim.

Much to his surprise, however, he heard the emperor suggest that the ladies of the Spanish army be also invited. This meant Doña Marina, Cortés' mistress, Dona Luisa, Xicotencatl's daughter, who lived as Alvarado's concubine, and several other distinguished and highly respected Indian ladies, who lived as unofficial wives with other Spanish captains. But above all, it meant Xuchitl. Cortés agreed also to this desire of his royal prisoner. When Alonso was told of Cortés' order, he went to see the chief, to talk the matter over with him. The general listened the more sympathetically as he was himself inclined to jealousy. "Don Alonso," he said, in the ceremonious manner of the day, "I will not order you this or that. But my advice is: let her be of the party. It will be a public affair and he will be bound to behave. My lady Doña Suchil's absence might be interpreted otherwise than you would wish." Alonso blushed slightly. "Of course, sir, you realise that I must remain on shore, lest the turbulent party seize their opportunity and——" "Yes. Of course, I am aware of that. But precisely. My advice is—let my lady Doña Suchil go on board."

When Xuchitl heard of this conversation she reflected a while, then said: "My pleasure would be to stay, for I do not feel at ease near Moteczuma; but I believe the general is right. All the same, I should like the dog with me."

The day came. The sloop was moored alongside the emperor's landing-stage. She was a graceful craft, with six benches for two oarsmen each, and a mast for two sails. Aft, a kind of castle or open cabin afforded sitting accommodation for a number of persons. Chairs

and cushions of a most luxurious character had been provided. Though a Spanish-built craft, she bore subtle traces of Mexican influence. Moteczuma took the central seat by the rudder. It was easy for him to rule, on grounds of Mexican etiquette, that Nezawal Pilli's daughter should sit at his right hand. Xuchitl appeared and as Moteczuma, wreathed in smiles, advanced to offer her his hand, he saw the black dog close to her, following her steps faithfully. Alonso was not to be seen. Moteczuma was convinced that the dog was Alonso. His first impulse was to forbid dogs on board, but as he was thinking this dark thought, the dog, thinking thoughts of his own, recognised him and growled, showing his white teeth. "There," thought Moteczuma. "He reads my thoughts." He was so disconcerted that he lost control over events. Xuchitl stepped on board and the dog leapt over the edge of the sloop following his mistress like a liquid shadow. The other guests came in, talking excitedly about the boat, her shape, colour and speed, and presently all was forgotten in the exhilaration of a voyage across the sunny waters of the lagoon at the breath-taking speed of a sail gently swollen by a slight breeze.

Moteczuma sat between Xuchitl and Doña Luisa, the Tlaxcatec lady who lived as Alvarado's wife. The emperor was uneasy and cast side-glances at the dog, who had settled down at Xuchitl's feet. Moteczuma did not speak. Every now and then he touched the Heart of Jade under his bright-coloured mantle, trusting that its magic powers would act. Xuchitl remained cold and aloof towards him, amused and interested by all she saw on board and captivated by the graceful mechanism of the sails and ropes.

When they arrived on the rock-island Moteczuma soon saw to his dismay that his hopes of losing sight of the strong guard of Spaniards who kept watch over him were a sheer delusion. The captains in charge had strict orders not to relax their vigilance, particularly on land, where it might have been relatively easy for him to try to escape. Moteczuma was not thinking of escaping. He was thinking of trapping Xuchitl into some secluded corner of the little island he knew so well, where she might succumb to the powers which he attributed to the Heart of Jade he was wearing. He felt the more furious at his lack of freedom since the dog, scenting the game which ran free all over the island, had disappeared barking with joy. After some sport, which the emperor, for once, did not enjoy, he was unable to resist his boredom and disappointment and gave orders to re-embark. No one could find the dog. Moteczuma thought this might be an excellent opportunity for getting rid of—whoever the dog was. Xuchitl insisted that they should wait till the Moor turned up, but Velázquez de León, who commanded the escort, wanted to be back before nightfall. As the sloop was on the point of leaving the rock, the Moor trotted back

limping. How had he been wounded? No one saw it happen for he had run away, but as he trotted back to his mistress, he held his left front paw in the air, without otherwise appealing for sympathy in any way.

The wind blew against them and the sailors were unable to show off the speed of their craft with as much swagger as in the morning. Moteczuma was brooding, self-absorbed and overcast. He had realised how short was his tether and he did not feel at ease in the midst of all these magical Whites. The sails had excited his admiration but he soon realised that it was the wind that drove them and, though this did but enhance his respect for the craftsmanship of his guests, it eased his mind in so far as it revealed a natural and not a magic power. But that dog . . . The sun was setting and the town of Tenochtitlán was still far away. Velázquez de León, half in jest, to entertain his royal passenger, half in earnest, to warn him against any possible misuse of the coming darkness, had his four guns fired. The noise was terrific. It shook the frail craft and raised clouds of water-birds in swift flights around the shaken sails. Moteczuma was startled but promptly regained his self-mastery and smiled with admiration at Velázquez de León. The night had fallen when the sloops, cutting two diverging bands of liquid lace on the quiet sheet of the lagoon, entered the private waters of Axayacatl's palace and finally stood at rest by the marble steps. On the steps, Alonso was waiting. His left arm was held in a white sling, the first thing which Moteczuma saw in the dark night. The emperor looked round for the dog. The Moor had disappeared. Moteczuma was terror-stricken and sank into the black, deep halls of his prison-palace muttering protective incantations against the powers of darkness.

25

Ixcawatzin had found true felicity at last when he had impersonated Tetzcatlipuca by becoming the Divine Youth for the year. It meant the complete reversal of the life he had lived till then. As a youth in the Calmecac, later as a military leader with a strong priestly side to his personality, Ixcawatzin had lived a life of stern privation and discipline. Every one of his pristine impulses had had to be repressed. Now he was to give vent to the promptings of his heart. Now life would serve him liberally with all the pleasures which it so niggardly reserves for the wealthy and the fortunate. He was lodged in splendid apartments, no less beautiful and luxurious than those of the emperor, in the imperial palace vacated by Moteczuma, treated with as much respect and reverence as the monarch and served as lavishly. He was

free to do what he pleased with his time and nothing was required of him save that his enjoyments should be worthy of the god he impersonated and should not impair the beauty of that body which was to be offered to the god at the end of the year.

He was not an oversensuous man and so, when the dams set to his nature were removed, there was no torrent, no rush to the pleasures till then forbidden. It was like a liberation, as if all life and not merely a part of it had become livable and lovable. Yet, though freedom and the sense of being above and beyond criticism were glorious, Ixcawatzin did not attach so much price to them as to something else which remained a promise and an expectation—those last twenty days of his now short life in which love was to reveal itself to him. He began to suspect that Xuchitl, whom he had lost for ever, had been for him the incarnation of love rather than love itself, and in the secret of his soul he lived in tense expectation of those last twenty days as if they were already a life-beyond, a paradise.

As time went by, he blessed fate for having shortened his period of waiting by more than half the usual length. How could the ordinary Divine Youth wait three hundred and forty days? Happy he who had only to wait about eight months of twenty days each. He counted them, days and months, with a growing impatience.

At last the longed-for month of Toxcatl arrived and on its first day Ixcawatzin saw the high priest of the cult of Tetzcatlipuca enter his rooms at the palace with solemn step. The church dignitary came to perform the ceremonies which were to transfigure Ixcawatzin's life. The Divine Youth was first bathed and washed clean of all his paint, and then the priests sheared his hair, till then worn long, and combed it high on top of the head in the manner of warriors, tying it up with a band of gold and feather-work from which hung two tassels of gold falling on either side of his face. When he was dressed and adorned in his new style, Ixcawatzin was left alone for a while, and presently the high priest returned bringing the four maidens who were to sweeten his last twenty days on earth. They were singularly beautiful as prescribed by tradition and ritual, and free from the slightest physical defect. The high priest presented them to Ixcawatzin not with their actual names but with the names of the four goddesses they were supposed to impersonate: Xochiquetzatl; Xilomen; Atlatouan; Vixtocioatl.

Ixcawatzin was exhilarated at the sight of the four maidens. His masculine strength was intact; all his need of feminine company and tenderness was unsatisfied, in fact uncultivated, undiscovered. But his instincts, all the more awake in the depth of his unfrequented self, were already enjoying the aroma of the four human flowers which life offered as a last present to him who was about to die.

He smiled and looked at them in turn, while they observed him at close range having seen him so often in the distance during the months that had gone by, knowing that they were destined for him. Xochilquetzatl drew his eyes again and again, because of the name of the goddess which she impersonated. Xuchitl-Quetzatl, the union of the two fateful names. He wondered how that fact would colour his amorous encounter with her. There were some ritual gestures, some incense-burning, some prayers to be muttered, but even he, so deeply religious, failed to enter into the details of the ceremony. His heart and soul were caught in the tense drama—four loves—twenty days—death.

Four loves.. One had on a red-yellow huipil ; another one grey-blue ; another one green and a fourth one brown. He knew what it meant, for he was an initiate and had been instructed in the ways of the priests. He kissed them on the mouth in the prescribed fashion, holding their hands palm against palm and was able to verify that the high priest had given them their names and attire after due consideration of their respective temperaments ; for he found that Vixtocioatl's hands were damp and cold ; Atlatouan's damp and hot ; Xochilquetzatl's dry and hot and Xilomen's dry and cold. They incarnated the four spirits of nature : water, earth, fire, air. The Divine Youth had a right to choose the order in which he would enjoy his four loves ; but Ixcawatzin, who had studied the science of the calendar, made up his mind to be guided by the names of the Lords of the Night who governed the first four days of the month. He knew them by heart : Tecpatl, Xochitl, Centeotl, Miquiztli ; or Flint, Flower, Goddess of the Maize-Fields, and Death ; he decided that Flint was fire, Flower was air ; Maize-Goddess was earth, and Death was water, for though it did not quite tally, the next day in the month was under the advocacy of Atl, which means water. Hardly had he made this plan when he bethought him of reasons for changing it. He had a feeling that his love-experience should begin with water, going then to earth, then to fire and finally to air, for, so it seemed to him, was he sure to find an ever ascending bliss. Had not his master told him that astrological considerations were not to be taken as a guide when other ways were available to find the true path ? So he made up his mind and he gave Vixtocioatl one kiss, Atlatouan two kisses, Xochilquetzatl three kisses and Xilomen four—the sign that they were to be his companions on the first, the second, the third and the fourth night of every group of four days during the last month of his life.

Vixtocioatl came to him that night. She was tall and thin and sinuous and she would not wait for him to take the initiative of love, but as soon as she found herself alone with him she embraced and enlaced him and wound her bare body round him like an avid serpent.

He felt like the prey of some lascivious love-reptile and let himself be devoured by her libidinous hunger which insatiably swallowed the food of love. "So," he thought in the intervals during which he lay on his back dreaming away while the love-serpent digested her prey, "so must love be in the depth of Jade-Glow's palaces, in the spacious green halls of our Lady the Goddess of Water where the serpents of water coil themselves round each other and fecundate each other with the first seeds of life." But he was disappointed. That spasm of his body when his tense desire was at last allowed to die and rest, was not sufficient to compensate him for the bonds of the cold, tenacious coils which imprisoned him, and in the midst of Vixtocioatl's embraces, he longed for freedom.

When the first glimmers of the morning shone on the horizon beyond the branches of the park trees, he was relieved to see her rise and gladder still to see her walk out of his room with her sinuous, boneless gait. He felt tired and in need of sleep. Towards midday, he rose, bathed and met his wife and his three maidens at table. The meal was served with as much luxury and ceremony as if he were the emperor. Flowers, colour, gold, the best fare, an aromatic acayatl for Ixcawatzin. The three maidens were gay and witty while Vixtocioatl remained silent and absorbed in her sensations and memories. In the afternoon the happy five were taken round the lagoon in one of the imperial canoes, elaborately carved and decorated with gold; an awning of white cotton embroidered with green feather-work protected them from the sun.

After their lake-party, Ixcawatzin withdrew for prayers and meditation and as he retired to bed, Atlatouan came to him. She was round and plump, with rosy cheeks and big black eyes. Her shoulders were wide and powerful and her hips wider and more powerful still. Her breasts were round and firm and big and her lips were full and red. She was very awkward and seemed at a loss, and unable to move. Ixcawatzin had unclasped her huipil and she allowed him to do as he pleased, too shy to express either her love for him or the thrill of pleasure which quickened her body at the touch of his hands. "What a contrast with Vixtocioatl!" he thought. Atlatouan was absolutely passive, though willing, and he had to do everything. Her young, perfect, hard, aromatic body roused his desires acutely and he could not tire of touching her, of caressing her full limbs so rich in substance and shape, which responded with a vigour of their own, born of the mass of muscle and of the hidden architecture of her bones, to his passionate pressure. A woman indeed! He enjoyed her and enjoyed her again. It was a delight, deeper and more satisfying to his senses than he could have imagined, and he felt overwhelmed by a feeling of gratitude towards her, who quiet, passive, unassuming and

humble, gave him her body and seemed to take nothing ; for though willing always and passively happy, or at any rate content, she did not share in the love encounter and did not vibrate when he was feeling like the lord of the earth in the life-giving joy of creation.

He was sorry to see her go in the morning, slowly and perhaps also respectfully, with a heavy rhythmical action of her round, firmly sculpted back which raised now this now that hip in a powerful alternance ; and that day, when he found himself alone, contrary to what he expected after such a night of sensuous joy, he felt light and rested, rose early and was gay the whole day long between his two merry, talkative maidens and his two brooding, dreaming wives.

That night was Xochilquetzatl's turn. He felt nervous and worried owing to the mere accident of the name. Xochilquetzatl was not in the least like Xuchitl. She was thin and at first, when with a sudden, spontaneous gesture of her own, she let fall her huipil before him, he thought her body resembled that of Vixtocioatl, the water-maiden—boneless also, he thought. But she was smaller and sturdier. She had small, firm breasts but Ixcawatzin felt somehow or other that her shape mattered less in itself than a kind of vibration, a quivering which kept her body ever alive and tense. He took a violent desire for her even before he had touched her, and when she was in his arms found that her skin was hot and that her limbs vibrated as with a fever, and suddenly—what a divine marvel !—she was no longer herself, a different body and person ; he was no longer himself either. Both were one, burning together in a common fire. Answer ? No. He could not say she answered him, for he was unable to distinguish between his life and hers and their enjoyment was but one long union in which both lost themselves and each found himself in the other. Oh what a night ! This was what he had dreamt ! This was the life after which nothing but death was worth tasting. In his brief stretches of sleep, Ixcawatzin dreamt of his next joy and he awoke for it with an eager appetite for a re-born happiness. The morning came and she ran out of the room laughing and throwing kisses at him while he, tired and happy, lay for a long time in bed warming his soul at the sun of her love.

That day he was graver than usual. He spent it on the lagoon with his merry maid Xilomen, who warbled away while his three wives dreamt of his love. And when the night came he felt a secret impatience. For, said he, what can Xilomen give me which divine Xochilquetzatl has not already revealed ? So, Xilomen came. She was slender and graceful, not very tall, and had a thin elegant body, perfect in every proportion and so delicately modelled that every line seemed to take a delight in melting into the next with the most loving curves. She had

smiling, clear, transparent eyes, which looked straight and deep into him, and from the first he noticed them and felt their penetrating power which stirred him deeply down to the core of his heart. She knelt by him while he lay on his couch, and her eyes were in his eyes and a quiet smile blossomed in her beautiful oval face. He sat up resting on his elbow and came closer to her, drawn by some magical force from her pupils, which he tried hard to understand by describing it to himself as some sort of immaterial honey—it was unutterably sweet—but it was not material. He was sure it was not desire. He was not thinking of her body at all. But he was sure it was sweet, tender, infinitely blissful; and it was drawing him closer and closer to her. He had sat up and she, without ceasing to glance right into his eyes for the tiniest instant, let herself gradually glide down his arm—so that she was now sitting on the edge of the couch and her head was resting on his chest. There they remained for a long time, melting his glance and her glance into a union so perfect, so pure, so clean, that when later, much later, their bodies claimed a share in the joy and gave themselves to each other, they lay together, on their backs, hand in hand, and wept tears of joy and of sadness for the beauty which they had known and which, they feared, would never know again.

26

Cortés went with Alonso and other captains to visit the great teocalli. When Moteczuma heard of it he was mortally afraid. He tried to comfort himself with the thought that the Spanish chief had sent away so many of his captains and troops to explore his empire that he would not dare commit a sacrilegious attack on the native gods; but then, did that extraordinary person really depend on military power?

While the emperor meditated in his golden cage, Cortés had reached the platform on top of the one hundred and thirteen steep steps the ascent of which was in itself a real sacrifice to the gods. A heavy curtain, sewn all over with bells, barred access to the chapel, and even when the Spaniards had passed beyond it, they found it made the room so dark that they could see nothing. With their swords, they tore the curtain away. The four walls of the chapel, elaborately sculpted, were covered with two inches of dry blood. In this gruesome atmosphere, the gods, gigantic figures about twelve feet high carved in stone, studded all over with mother-o'-pearl and precious stones and masked with turquoise and gold, rose on granite pedestals about three feet high.

Cortés remained silent, beholding the bloodthirsty monsters. By his side Alonso was brooding over the mystery which had tortured his mind ever since he had known this new land—perhaps even since his childhood. "Why is this possible?" To his amazement, Cortés after a long silence, uttered his own thoughts in an impassioned lament. "Oh Lord," exclaimed the usually cold and smiling chief, "why do you tolerate that the Evil One should be worshipped in this land?" This exclamation in a man such as Cortés was bound to lead to action. He turned to the priests, who nervous and uneasy hung about watching the Spanish visitors, and ordered: "Bring water and wash these walls clean. We shall take away all this and purify this place and we shall put here the image of God and of His Blessed Mother."

The priests grinned. He did not mean it, of course. But his face belied the thoughts they attributed to him. One of the priests said: "We live by our gods and are ready to die for them." Cortés sent word to keep a close watch on Moteczuma and to have fifty men sent him to the teocalli. But he was too impatient to wait for them: "I shall be glad to fight for my God against this Nothingness," he said. He seized an iron bar which happened to be at hand and with incredible agility rose to within reach of the images—his men thought he had leapt in the air by supernatural powers—and struck the idols on their masked faces. The golden mask of Tetzcatlipuca fell on the stone floor and the turquoise mask of Witchilopochtli fell on Alonso's hands.

While the Spaniards carried the bulky images down and the priests fled horror-stricken, the blood-steeped chapels, emptied of their sanguinary gods, were cleansed and white-washed and transfigured into shrines of the Mother and Child.

27

That night, in the still of the darkness, when even the slightest wavelet lapping on the jasper edge of a landing step could be heard; Alonso was awakened by a voice he had never heard before. Xuchitl slept peacefully by his side. The moon shed a stream of blue light over the right side of the room, bathing in its eerie light a small world which lived on a table under the window—in particular a little Flemish picture of the Mother and Child and the turquoise Mask of Witchilopochtli which rested close to it. The ethereal blue light of the moon fell on the mineral blue light of the turquoise, quickening the mask's features with a kind of bloom of light; and the two pupils, made of black shiny obsidian, caught tiny round moons in their perfect orbs, which imparted to the mask a human, yet inhuman, a natural, yet

supernatural, glance. The Virgin smiled at the feminine planet as one does to a friend who understands without words.

"Yes," said the Mask to the Virgin, "you have expelled me. And now you stand where I had stood for ages. But we gods do not measure time with the same clock as men."

"I am modest in my aspirations," answered the Mother. "All women are. And I am content to win for the time being."

"How do you know that you are winning even for the time being? You sit before men with your Child in your arms, to give them the spectacle of sweetness, patience and devotion. But the longer they look at you, the harder they think of me. The better they yield to you, the deeper they long for me. The more they love, the more they fight."

"Not if they love with my love," replied the Mother smiling at her Child.

The tiny blue moons inside the black obsidian eyes shone with a pointed light and a smile seemed to twist ever so slightly the square mouth across the turquoise Mask. "But can they? I do not know how far you have succeeded with your Europeans. Here, amongst the Aztecs, we have found that unless blood is spilt generously at our feet, blood will be spilt miserably in taverns, brothels and market-places. So, blood for blood, let us spill it in an upward direction, in a gesture of sacrifice. Notice how my priests, as soon as they have struck open the chest of our victims, raise the heart in triumph towards me. No blood but towards god. Such is our creed. Now, you send your soldiers hither knowing little or nothing about my people's ways and what is their first order? 'Stop human sacrifices.' Who are they to know that human sacrifices should stop? Is the fact that they are unpleasant to them a sufficient reason?"

Alonso did not know whether he was asleep or awake, but he did know that the black and blue eyes of the Mask glanced in a challenging manner at the ever placid image of the Virgin. "Yes. It is," she answered sweetly but firmly, looking always at her Child, never at the Mask. "It is, because they are men in whose hearts there shines for ever the light which my Son . . ." (It seemed to Alonso that she had hugged the Child as she uttered these words) ". . . kindled, and this Light cannot lead them astray."

The Mask was supercilious. "You sentimental woman! Do you not see that your Son is no authority to quote against human sacrifices? Why, there is no Aztec god who is not green with envy at the thought of His idea: to become the victim of a human sacrifice performed every day everywhere by millions of priests! And you dare speak against human sacrifices!"

"I pity you, poor benighted idol," said the Virgin. "You see no

difference between an idol who demands at least a victim a day and a God who offers himself as a victim every day. My Son gives all to men and they cannot repay it even by a lifetime of devotion." "That must discourage them!" retorted the Mask pessimistically. "In any case it can hardly appeal to my people. All this accountancy in sacrifice smacks of a religion born of a trading people used to discussions of give and take with their gods. Our Aztecs are a people of warriors. They do not understand give and take as a matter of exchange. They only understand war: take, if they win; give, if they lose. And they know that with the gods it must always be give. All. Life. We are exacting and absolute. We want their hearts and we want them panting. That keeps them healthy, contemptuous of life and therefore contemptuous of wealth, clean and incorruptible. But if you wash our teocallis clean of human blood and bring in the pretty, poetic, womanly make-believe of a divine sacrifice which is not a sacrifice, do you think our men are going to be content with your pretty conceits? No, I can assure you, no. They will carry on their human sacrifices but to other and lower gods than we are."

The Virgin looked grave. "My men and my women will see to that. They will mingle their bloods and souls with your people. In the depth of this coming generation, a river of mixed waters, my soul and spirit will triumph over yours. They will transfigure their animal energies into song, form and colour. They will build huge temples of beauty, forests of stone to the glory of God and they will burn themselves away like candles before the altars of my Son to serve His purposes."

Alonso saw the copper Cross and the copper Sun shining in a blaze of light above the altar in the Otomi settlement. The dazzling light of the sun woke him up. The room was transfigured. The Mask and the Virgin were motionless in the shade and the light of the present day was alive everywhere, while Xuchitl smiled at him with her sweet smile inherited from her Aztec mother.

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PART XIV

THE REVENGE OF THE MASK

I

ORTEGUILLA came to see Alonso that morning. The young page lived in a closer touch with the emperor and his intimate circle than any other Spaniard and had made rapid progress in the Nauatl language. Alonso had asked him to find out all he could about the origin of the heavy sum of gold which the treasurer had found in Esquivel's possession, and in particular whether, as Esquivel asserted, it was in fact a present from Moteczuma. Orteguilla reported that it was so, for the emperor himself had told him, though Moteczuma would not disclose the reason for such an extraordinary present. "But, sir, I have not given much thought to that for I have weightier news for you." Alonso was struck by the page's grave tone and concerned countenance. "Moteczuma has spent the whole night locked up with his priests and captains, and though at times I was allowed in, they spoke so low and so between their teeth that I did not gather the actual words of what they said; yet it was written plain enough in their faces and gestures. They are in a warlike mood against us." "And why?" asked Alonso. "Because we have expelled their gods from the temple."

Evidently, mused Alonso, Witchilopochtli was not satisfied with the outcome of his debate with the Virgin. Trouble was ahead. Cortés, with his superb self-assurance, had sent away two-thirds of his best forces on various errands. Alonso sent Orteguilla back to Moteczuma and went to visit the general.

Cortés lost no time. He went at once to Moteczuma's apartments with Alonso and a number of other captains and soldiers. He found a different man. Moteczuma was no coward when he had to face merely natural forces and beings. Indeed it was impossible under the Aztec system that a coward should ever reach the throne. He had often suffered from terror and fear, but only before powers which he thought supernatural. The Spaniards were for him people of such powers. The ease with which Alonso could turn himself into a dog—a fact by now fully established in his mind—was a proof of it; those metal tubes which could kill at a distance with mere noise were another. To justify his subjection to the supernatural powers of Cortés, Moteczuma had convinced himself that his own gods counselled such a course. When Cortés knocked down the gods, he unwittingly destroyed one of the

bases of his hold over Moteczuma. The whole structure came down with a crash. In the peculiar magical-religious world of Moteczuma what had happened was that his gods had instructed him to summon Cortés to leave Mexico or else to expect war.

This is what he explained to Cortés. The Spanish captain was calm and self-possessed, the more so as he fully realised the danger. "We must be given time to build ships in which to sail home," he answered plausibly. The emperor acquiesced. "But waste no time about it," he warned.

While they spoke, nineteen ships had arrived in Veracruz.

2

It was a fleet blown from Cuba across to the coast of Mexico by the hot winds of vindictive passion. Velázquez, the Governor of Cuba, was sending a strong force against his rebellious officer Cortés. Its commander was Pánfilo de Narváez. The news of its arrival reached Moteczuma before it did Cortés, and the emperor, bewildered at first, delighted afterwards, sent several embassies to and fro, guessing that Narváez might be a welcome ally against Cortés. So one day Moteczuma sent a message to the Spanish general asking him to come to his apartments. "Malintzin," he said with a sly smile, "I am glad you will soon be able to leave, for now there will be no lack of ships." And he put before the general a painted cloth showing nineteen ships, nearly a hundred horse, numerous guns and over a thousand men. Cortés mastered his surprise with his usual serenity. "I thank the Lord for this welcome help!" he exclaimed with a sincerity so well imitated that it took in his own captains and soldiers. The news spread like wild-fire and in the yard, the Spanish soldiers shouted for joy.

But Cortés' heart was heavy and as he left the emperor's hall, he shook his head and said to Alonso and Sandoval who were by his side: "May the Lord save us from our own brothers!" This mood was soon observed by the other Spaniards who accompanied him, and the army came round to a more sober view of the situation. The news which came direct from the coast was bad enough. Narváez brought such a powerful force that, not unnaturally, he took his triumph over Cortés as a foregone conclusion. That did not worry Cortés. What worried him was to have to leave Tenochtitlán just when he was becoming the true effective ruler of Anahuac. This was the thought that tortured his mind. Yet he did not hesitate, and he decided to go and meet his adversary as near the coast—which meant as far away

from Tenochtitlán—as possible, and if unable to come to terms with him, to destroy him in spite of his superior strength.

He devoted the utmost care to the choice of the garrison he had to leave behind. At the head of it he put Alvarado, his second in command, to whom he gave Alonso as Chief Constable and Chief of Staff. He made elaborate precautions to fortify the palace of Axayacatl, turning it into a regular fortress, but he could not afford to leave Alvarado more than eighty men. He left the town for the coast with a heavy heart, not because of the danger which awaited him in Veracruz but because of that in which he left his garrison. Alonso seized the opportunity to have Esquivel released from jail, on the plea that they needed all the men they had. Alvarado, who did not like Esquivel, reluctantly assented.

3

Moteczuma was much elated by the arrival of Narváez's fleet. He took it as a special favour from Witchilopochtli. For him, this fleet of Christians was but an instrument, whereby Witchilopochtli avenged himself of the insults which Cortés had inflicted upon him. Moteczuma was therefore convinced that, with the help of Witchilopochtli, Narváez would win. It was his plan to prepare a rising against Alvarado and his eighty men, so that as soon as the news of Cortés' defeat reached him through his well-organised system of couriers the Spaniards in Tenochtitlán should be instantly destroyed. This would enable him to go out and launch an attack on Narváez himself.

Alvarado did not fail to notice what was going on around him as a result of this plan. Streets were being barricaded and house-terraces quietly transformed into forts, while weapons were being made and stored up in several parts of the *teocallis* and communal houses of the town, where Alvarado's auxiliary Indians (none too friendly to the Mexicans) were able to detect them. Dark hints were now and then dropped by imprudent Mexican youths. One day Orteguilla observed a number of changes in the Great *Teocalli* opposite the Spanish headquarters. Garlands of paper smeared with molten rubber were being hung and one could hear hammering everywhere. Orteguilla noticed that an acolyte of the temple of Witchilopochtli was erecting a row of poles just like those on which the heads of the victims of certain sacrifices used to be stuck. He asked the young priest what they were for. "To stick your silly heads on, all in a row," answered the acolyte. Orteguilla did not realise that the answer was meant to release irritation rather than to convey information. He was terrified and ran to tell his story to Alonso and Alvarado with tears in his eyes.

Alonso went to find out the truth of the matter. Hardly had he left the headquarters when he came upon a spectacle which moved him deeply. He was on the edge of the lagoon. A rich canoe of the imperial house, gilt, carved, decorated and covered with an awning of glistening green and white feather-work, a thing of beauty which would have struck all Europe with admiration, was gliding gracefully along the sunlit waters of the lagoon—the very image of easy felicity. On board it, near the bow, a cluster of young pages brilliantly clad; next to them four beautiful young women and between two of these girls, one arm round the neck of each, sitting languorously at the bow, Ixcawatzin, no longer painted and no longer wearing his hair down like a woman but combed high like a warrior, and adorned with two gold-and-feather tassels . . . Alonso looked on as the canoe swam past him. So, there went Ixcawatzin, softly gliding towards death. His last twenty days had arrived and he was living amid the delights of love and leisure before offering his panting heart to the gods.

That might well be the key to the events which were frightening Orteguilla and occupying Alvarado's mind. It was the month of Toxcatl, otherwise the Garland-of-Roast-Maize, and Ixcawatzin's sacrifice would be but a part of the elaborate ceremonies wherewith the Aztecs celebrated the arrival of Spring. He thought this discovery worth reporting at once, if only to ease Alvarado's mind.

As he entered his chief's room, he saw Alvarado turn to him with a sigh of relief from a group of three Aztec priests: "Here, you come in time. I do not understand what these ill-smelling worthies want." Alonso explained first what he had observed. The closing ceremonies of the month of Toxcatl included a festival in which the chief nobility—identical with the chief warriors and captains—had to participate. It was therefore practically indistinguishable from a kind of "muster." While Alonso explained this to Alvarado, the three priests waited. Alonso then turned to them, heard them and translated their quest. They had come to ask Alvarado's permission to hold the ceremonies of Toxcatl as usual in the chief *teocalli*. Alvarado granted it but with one important reservation: "Tell them that on no account will I tolerate human sacrifices." The priests tried to explain that without the sacrifice of the Divine Youth and of Teicauhzin, the young man who incarnated *Witchilopochtli*, the festival had no religious sense—indeed no sense at all. Alonso did not think it even worth while translating. In the matter of human sacrifices the Spaniards were adamant. They would consent to none.

The priests left in solemn silence, unable to conceal their anger. Alvarado asked Alonso: "Why, I wonder, should they come to ask our leave? They are much stronger than we are." Both men considered the matter in silence, and both came to the same conclusion,

which Alvarado expressed saying : " Perhaps they wanted a refusal . . . and a grievance. Let us be ready for any emergency. Call every man in and double the sentinels."

4

Alonso was busy for the best part of the day seeing to the safety of the vast palace. When he arrived in his apartments, Citlali was waiting rather impatiently. " Sir," she said, " Xuchitlzin is in Papantzin's house." Alonso was not at first alive to the importance of the news, and she added : " I am most uneasy about it. Long Face has been here three times this afternoon, hoping to find you in and . . . here he is." Long Face hurried in. " Sir, the city is in an ugly mood. The priests have been stirring it against us because of the refusal to allow human sacrifices, and anything might happen. I think you ought to go and fetch Xuchitlzin with a strong escort." Alonso calmed him. " Fear not. The Lord will see to it. Come with me and we shall bring her back in safety."

He passed first by Alvarado's quarters. The impulsive and imperious captain rushed to Moteczuma, whom he thought responsible for the trouble, and without the slightest respect for the forms of etiquette, which Cortés had always punctiliously observed, he entered the imperial room and shouted to Orteguilla : " Tell the emperor he will answer with his life if there is trouble in the city." Orteguilla was ashamed to have to translate this brutal message and tried to find words to soften it down, while Moteczuma, humiliated and vexed under a screen of placid indifference, smoked his acayotl and waited, looking now at the page, now at the red-haired, irate captain. " Sir, the captain says the town is astir and he expects you to give instant orders to calm it." The emperor said to the page : " His words sounded stronger than you put them to me." Orteguilla blushed. " He added that you would . . . be in danger if you did not calm the town." The emperor smiled. He was no coward and he feared death no more than any of his countrymen. And moreover he felt strong, with the gods on his side. But he was so far in agreement with Alvarado in that he thought that the wave of indignation which the priests had raised in the city was but a forerunner of the storm. " Tell Tonatiuh," he said with the utmost calm, referring to Alvarado by the nickname (the sun) which the Mexicans gave him, " to put his trust in me, for I am his best friend." And he went on smoking as if Alvarado were not there.

Meanwhile Alonso had gone to Papantzin's palace in Tlatelolco and rejoined his wife. As they walked back to the Spanish headquarters

they noticed that groups of frowning Tenochca (or inhabitants of Tenochtitlán) watched them pass in sullen silence. One of these groups followed them and began to address them in a defiant, insulting manner. The crowd became more threatening till suddenly, as they turned the corner of a square one side of which was covered with gravel and stone for building purposes, a stone was thrown at them which nearly hit Long Face on the head. More stones followed. The two men tried to screen Xuchitl. The attack became more threatening and, to protect the rear of his little troop, Alonso made them stand with their backs to a building. He drew his sword and covered Xuchitl, who was small, with his left arm. Long Face, who had had an idea, had slipped away. The stones went on falling at their feet, over their heads, on their legs. One struck Alonso's left arm, several his helmet and one, a sharp-edged piece of flint, wounded him on the shoulder and made him bleed abundantly. Some of the bolder men, excited by the sight of the blood, sprang on him. He slashed two or three with his sword, aiming at their legs, for he wished to avoid a tragedy which in the circumstances would have been deadly for him; yet he was beginning to think that his only remedy lay in a bold and desperate break through by a deft use of his steel blade, when suddenly the peaceful melody of Tetzcatlipuca's flute was heard in the side street and the crowd ceased their wild attacks and hearkened to the sacred music. Ixcawatzin appeared on the scene, with a slow dignified and serene step, clad in a white mantle clasped by a golden brooch, shod in gold-soled cotaras. The crowd squatted worshipfully. Ixcawatzin advanced towards Alonso and Xuchitl and stood before them in silence for a while. He had not seen either of them for a long time. There they were, at his mercy, both. Alonso was bleeding. His leather-doubling was open and on his chest the Heart of Jade was weeping drops of blood. Ixcawatzin thought of Nezawal Pilli, on whose chest he had seen the Heart of Jade weeping blood also. He gave them his hands, and so the Divine Youth, with Xuchitl on his right hand and Alonso on his left and Long Face behind closing the procession, left the battlefield and went on peacefully through the streets of the town to the Spanish headquarters.

5

Alvarado had not taken Moteczuma at his word and had sent for twenty men to guard the emperor's room—a form of pressure which Cortés would hardly have used. He was waiting in the emperor's apartment for the news which his scouts brought him from time to time, to see whether the messages sent by the emperor, ostensibly to calm the town, were having the desired effect.

The arrival of Ixcawatzin with Alonso and Xuchitl was the last event which any of the persons present expected. Moteczuma was deeply upset when he saw together the three persons who had played the chief parts in his personal tragedy—that personal tragedy which had become for him a symbol of the tragedy of Anahutac under the Spanish conquest. But one detail in the picture struck him with terror first, with indignation afterwards. Alonso was wearing the Heart of Jade on his blood-covered chest. His magic powers again! He had recovered the stolen jewel without having to bribe a soldier for it! Moteczuma drew his hand to his chest and, through his blue mantle, felt the Heart of Jade hanging there. No. There it was on his chest. Then, who had it? Whose was the right one? How bothersome people could be! What were they saying? What was Alonso speaking about? The main thing was whose Heart of Jade was the true one and whose the false. Now Alvarado was speaking to him. What was he shouting for? He did not care. Could Alvarado tell him which was the true and which was the false Heart of Jade, or perhaps whether that black dog of Alonso had the power to double the Heart of Jade and have one hanging on his chest while allowing the other one to remain on the emperor's? Oh why should Alvarado shout so much! Did he know about the Heart of Jade? Was there anything else to shout about? No wonder he, Moteczuma, could produce no impression on Xuchitl with his Heart of Jade if the real one was still on that black dog's chest. But, of course, now he knew which was true and which was false. Had his shown any virtue? The fact was that he had been swindled by that Spanish soldier . . . there he was in the ranks.

"Tonatiuh," said the emperor, "calm yourself. All will be well. This was but a small affair after all. I will keep the city in order. But grant me a favour. Do you see that soldier there, the third in the front-rank? He is a thief. He has stolen some gold from me. He must be hanged." Alvarado turned to Esquivel. "You are a scoundrel," he said. And then to Alonso: "Back to jail with him! He should never have come out!"

6

On the day which followed this scene, Ixcawatzin's five last days began. The first four were spent in luxurious banquets offered him by the whole court. The emperor abstained from these festivals, so that the place of honour should not be in doubt. Everything which Mexico had to offer in colour, luxury, amenity, good food, good dancing was lavishly given to honour the Divine Youth and to bid him farewell. On the last day the imperial canoe came to fetch him with his four.

wives and his eight pages, and they all glided away on the silky waters of the lagoon to Cabaltepec, a hill between Chalco and Iztapalapa, where the party landed and climbed to the top of the hill. There, after a last kiss, Ixcawatzin said farewell to his four wives, who parted from him and returned to Mexico. He remained alone with his eight pages and, under the shade of a wood, meditated for long on his imminent death. He faced it without regret. He had tasted all that life had to give. He saw the coming downfall of all that he stood for and believed in. Xuchitl had become a Spaniard at heart. Moteczuma was beaten at heart. Why should he live? Xilomen . . . Yes. Those eyes of hers . . . that unique glance . . . But it would never shine again. Such things never happen twice. He was ready.

It had been found necessary to alter the traditional ceremony. Normally the Divine Youth was sacrificed in a small teocalli, to the west of the town, on his way back from Cabaltepec. This time, owing to the strangers' veto, the human sacrifice would have to take place in the Great Teocalli, though it was right under the eyes of the Spaniards, for the crowd which would fill the temple, even unarmed, would, it was hoped, keep them at bay. The canoe came to fetch Ixcawatzin and his pages and presently the Divine Youth was standing at the foot of the one hundred and thirteen steps which led up to the stone on which he was to die.

His pages were formed in two rows behind him ; each of the boys carried a basket full of flutes—the flutes on which he had played during his Divine Year. The vast yard of the teocalli was crowded to capacity. The Spaniards noticed it and came out on to the numerous terraces of their headquarters just across the street. Alvarado and Alonso were on Axayacatl's own terrace with Doña Elvira (Alvarado's concubine) and Xuchitl. The big drum above stirred the placid, sunny air with its lugubrious drone. The Divine Youth set foot on the first step. His first page handed him a flute. He stood on that first step, broke the flute with his knee and threw the two pieces down behind him. With a vigorous, resolute movement, he set foot on the second step. His page handed him a second flute. He broke it in the same manner, threw the pieces down behind him and stepped on the third. And so, with his eyes steadily fixed on the top platform where the priests waited, he went on step after step, breaking on each of them one of the flutes of his Divine Year.

"Do you think they will dare to sacrifice him?" asked Alvarado, "I see no knife in the priest's hand." And Alonso answered: "Yes. They will. They know we are not strong enough." Ixcawatzin went on, step after step, rising towards his death. His body showed no signs either of fatigue or of dismay. Xuchitl's heart was beating fast in her breast. So many memories were rising in her as she saw the companion

of her childhood and youth mount towards that holocaust which her father disliked so much ! How far was her indifference responsible for that tense scene ? Ixcawatzin, " the Disdained One " Disdained ! The priest who chose his name knew his profession ! Yet Xuchitl felt no commiseration. She realised that Ixcawatzin was living one of those sovereign hours which nothing can surpass and which should be envied rather than pitied. He, meanwhile, rose higher and higher, free, the only truly free man on that vast stage.

He broke the last flute and climbed the last step. Four priests seized him and laid him on the stone. A flash of sunlight shone on the obsidian knife and the high priest raised his arm towards the sun with Ixcawatzin's heart still panting in his gory hand. Xuchitl fell on her knees, sobbing. Alonso put his hand on her hair and whispered to her : " The Lord will forgive him and receive his pure soul in Paradise."

7

Alvarado was furious. " This is sheer insolence. Under our very nose. What are they doing now ? " Four priests were carrying the body down step after step. When they reached the yard below, an old man came forward and beheaded the body, then stuck the head through the temples on a stick to be put on the tzompantli, a pole erected for the purpose at the foot of the steps. The soldiers in the lower terraces were getting restive. " That is not what we came here for ! " they shouted. And, illogically enough, some of them added : " Death to those priests of the Devil ! " Alvarado was feeling just as his soldiers were. Alonso measured the situation with a colder eye. Suddenly the crowd in the yard was pushed aside by the guards of the temple so as to leave a huge empty square space in the middle, and the dance began.

The priests were all painted black and their faces shone with honey with which they were smeared. On their heads they wore crests of white hen-feathers ; in their hands they carried a kind of wand or sceptre made of palm, with a ball of black feathers at the lower end and a crest of black feathers at the top. The warriors were clad in their best attire with a profusion of jewels and feathers of great value, so that presently the amount of wealth under the eager eyes of the Spaniards was more than most of them could resist, and the forces of greed, unleashed by the Devil, came to add zest and appetite to the virtuous indignation which agitated many a Spanish breast. The girls had now arrived for the dance, decorated with red hen-feathers, stuck to their arms and legs. The dance wound itself here and there in human serpents which moved in rhythm with the beat of batteries of

drums concealed under the lateral galleries of the yard. The black priests crested with white feathers, the girls, like strange birds covered with red feathers, and the variegated, glistening warriors, made up a strange, long, many-footed, many-armed animal which wound its way this way and, that raising now its right side, now its left, formed of scores of feathered and adorned arms in perfect unison, like the two long fins of a monster glittering in the sun.

"To death ! To death !" shouted Alvarado's men. He thought wiser to lead rather than to be led, and shouting "To death !" rushed out of the palace with his sword flashing in the sun.

Suddenly the women and the few men, including Alonso who had remained in the palace if only to provide measures against the counter-clash which he saw was inevitable, beheld the inrush of the Spaniards shouting "To death !" into the midst of the crowd of dancers and spectators. It was like the furious encounter of two powerful rivers. Currents and countercurrents wound themselves into each other, under the screams and the screeches and the yells ; the yard was strewn with bodies and crossed and re-crossed by panic-stricken fugitives. Eager Spanish soldiers crouched over the dead and the wounded in search of jewels and gold and some, while thus engaged, were run through the body by a Mexican and fell over their would-be victims shouting : "Holy Mary ! Confession !" In an incredibly short time the Spaniards had re-entered their headquarters, the teocalli was empty but for the dead, and a huge crowd of Mexican warriors was besieging the palace of Axayacatl in which eighty Spaniards and a few hundred native auxiliaries had barricaded themselves against a foe whose head and leader they had in their midst.

Moteczuma smoked his acayotl and blessed Witchilopochtli who had blinded those he was bent on destroying.

8

The Mexican leaders outside were in close touch with the emperor by channels which the Spaniards were unable to detect. Moteczuma's instructions were : "Threaten but do not strike." He was wisely reserving his final strokes till he was certain of the turn of events. Then as often before and after in their history, the Spaniards were making their adversaries the present of a civil war. All that night the crowd outside was kept at a high pitch of indignation by the priests. Insults were hurled, stones were shot at the fortress, and Alvarado allowed only one-quarter of his contingent to sleep at a time. Nothing irreparable occurred, but when next day the crowd increased, the pitch of the noise rose and all services usually rendered to the Spaniards

ceased, the rash Alvarado forced Moteczuma to come out with him on to the terrace, drew his dagger, and pointing at the emperor's heart challenged the crowd to be silent. Silence fell. Then he said to the emperor : " Speak to them or this is your last hour ! " Moteczuma spoke to the crowd, asking them to be patient and to await the return of Cortés. The crowd gradually melted away, but Moteczuma sent further secret orders and at sunset the crowd returned as angry as ever. It was his plan to keep the Spaniards on edge and sleepless till the day came when he could fall upon them. He could not starve them, however, for Cortés had taken the precaution of stocking the fortress with maize and water.

Alvarado was impulsive but he was brave and cool also, and he faced the situation with courage, even though he realised its full gravity, particularly if Cortés were to be defeated by Narváez. The besieged men had to spend day after day beating off the howling enemy and repairing the damage done to the building and its defences. Alvarado had sent a message to Cortés explaining the situation. One day the tired Spaniards rose in the morning to find the usual crowd had melted away. Their sentinels explained that it had vanished in the night. " How do you account for that ? " asked Alvarado. And Alonso replied : " Moteczuma must have had news that Cortés has beaten Narváez." Presently Orteguilla turned up and reported that Moteczuma had received a new picture—he did not know how—about the coast ; he also brought a message from the emperor to the effect that he had arranged for a few hens to be brought to the garrison every day.

A week had not elapsed when the Spaniards heard the fifes and drums of Cortés' army. It was towards sunset and the bell of the chapel was calling the soldiers to Evensong when, warned by some sentinels, Alvarado rushed on to the terrace above the main gate. " Sir, is that you ? And victorious ? " he asked. And Cortés answered : " Yes. By the grace of God."

Alonso was looking on and in the squadron of horsemen behind Cortés he recognised Antonio.

9

The first question which Cortés, rather impatiently, put to his lieutenant was : " How did it happen ? " Alvarado's version was simple : " I was sure they meant to fall on us and to destroy us. So, I forestalled them." Cortés was indignant. " It was a most foolish thing to do ! " Alonso was very much embarrassed. He was in full agreement with Cortés and believed, with not a few of his men, that

the clash might have been avoided. He kept silent. Cortés took them both on a detailed inspection of the defences. On the way, the two men gave him an outline of the events of the siege, including the notable change which had taken place when the news of his victory over Narváez had reached the emperor. Cortés was pleased. He had triumphed over his rival who had come much better armed, with a force three times as numerous; a victory due to sheer bravery, initiative and skill. He was very much elated and inclined to rate himself very high. He was sure the emperor was afraid of him.

But though this was true enough Cortés failed to see the real cause of this fear, which was of an irrational character. It was not because he had come back with four times as many troops and ten times as many horse that Moteczuma was afraid of him; but because, in spite of the obvious fact that Witchilopochtli had favoured Narváez, it was Cortés who had won—which showed that the Spanish captain wielded magic powers higher than those of Witchilopochtli. Therefore Moteczuma and his countrymen were doomed.

Unless they could win over the favours of the man of Quetzalcoatl. From that day, therefore, Moteczuma made every possible endeavour to cultivate Cortés' friendship and ceased to countenance the revolt against him. He sent Cortés a message offering to have his statue made on horseback, of solid gold, if he would forget the past and co-operate again just as before his departure. But Cortés, unable to penetrate the tortuous, dark alleys of Moteczuma's mind, answered with pride and contempt that he did not wish to see one who had betrayed him.

Sick with humiliation Moteczuma sank into melancholy and allowed his warlike nephews outside to prepare for the resumption of war.

10

That evening Alonso and Antonio were sitting together on the terrace of Alonso's apartments. "Yes, I sold Santa Isabel. What else could I do? Your mother had already agreed to carry on as if you were dead—though she never did, never has to this day, accepted the idea . . ." Alonso was deeply moved. "But what about my father?" he asked. "Your father . . ." said Antonio, and it was obvious that he did not know what to answer, "your father . . . well . . . you have been . . . away so long . . . your father is . . . dead." Alonso had some difficulty in getting his mind attuned to that thought. He had never known, tasted, a world in which his father was dead. Now, there it was. He would never see him again. He tried to see him in his mind, powerfully built, black-eyed, fond of dogs and horses and falcons, and

of commanding and of being on top of things and people as a matter of course . . . Dead . . . "And when? And how?" "Two or three years after you left, perhaps with the worry of not hearing from you, he became moody and sad and tired. Then his leg became gangrenous and he died." There was a silence. "It was a serious blow to your mother, because it left her alone in the world, with no other help than Father Guzmán. As there was no news of you, your cousin, of the Manrique de Lara branch, put in a claim on the estate. He was made to wait for two years, not out of respect for you or for your mother, mind you, but because it meant running fees for half a dozen lawyers—for as you know, all lawyers are thieves, just like foxes. . . ." Alonso recognised the peculiar style of his friend, and smiled from the depth of his sorrow. Antonio went on: "Then they decided the case in his favour and your mother had to leave within a week." "Where does she live now?" asked Alonso. "Last time I heard of her she was in her own house, where her father used to live. Here," he concluded, putting a bundle of papers in Alonso's hand, "here is a packet of her letters to you. She always writes as if you were alive." "But I am alive!" exclaimed Alonso. "Yes, retorted Antonio, "but she was the only one to believe it."

Alonso took the packet with a hand trembling with emotion. He recognised the clear, even handwriting. He was longing to read the letters, but alone, in solitude, or in the sole presence of his wife. As he sat there in silence wondering how to get rid of Antonio, Father Olmedo appeared on the terrace.

II

"Forgive me, Sir Don Alonso, but you know, as soon as the sinners we left here with you knew I was back, they all asked to be relieved of their burdens. So I have something important to report to you. I have been confessing a badly wounded man who will probably pass away during the night. And as a result of his confession, which of course I cannot reveal, I must tell you that Moteczuma has accused Esquivel most unfairly. The gold was given him for . . . a service. The service was performed in all honesty. . . ." The good friar shook his head. "Well, that is not the word . . . but anyhow Esquivel gave Moteczuma something which Moteczuma paid for, and Esquivel thought he was giving what he was being paid for. Am I clear?" Antonio broke in. "I have heard you speak more clearly, sir." Father Olmedo smiled. "Possibly. But I cannot be more explicit. All I say is that Esquivel is not responsible because, though he meant to steal something, he did not succeed." Antonio and Alonso opened their

eyes wide. "That is even better!" said Antonio humorously; and Alonso asked: "What do you want me to do?" "Let the man go free." "Very well," replied Alonso. "But on one condition; that you explain to Alvarado that you ordered me to do so owing to some secret of confession."

The friar went to Esquivel's jail. He was lying on his mat, chained to the wall by a thick iron chain. "Again in trouble!" Father Olmedo scolded mildly. "What will you have, Father. Until the Lord has taken away that dirty Jew, the Chief Constable..." The friar frowned. "Hold your tongue till your mind has thought things out. How do you know Don Alonso has anything to do with your trouble?" "Of course he has. It is all the fault of his accursed amulet. A devilish piece, I am sure," asserted Esquivel with a robust faith, while his eyes shone with hatred. "And how do you make that out?" asked the friar in a cool objective mood. "The emperor wanted to have it. Of course I know why... So I promised I would give it to him. I did not mean to steal it, Father. Just to let Moteczuma have it for a few days. It could not be lost, could it? And when I gave it to him..."

"How did you manage that?" asked the friar. "Well, don't give me away. Ramírez got it for me." "Poor Ramírez!" said Father Olmedo. "He is on the point of death. I have just heard his confession... He paid one thousand almonds in the market for that heart of jade which he gave you!" Esquivel was taken aback. "The scoundrel! The devil take his skin!" "Why! You ungrateful man! You meant to be both a thief and a swindler, and thanks to poor Ramírez you were only a swindler and not a thief, since you stole nothing from Don Alonso..." Esquivel was burning with anger. "I told you! It is most unfair. I stole nothing from him. So, why should I be here?" "Still, Don Alonso did not put you here of his own free will, but at the request of the emperor and of Alvarado, and if you hang..." Esquivel was suddenly brought up against the hard cold fact which he wanted to forget. His voice faltered. "But Father..." Father Olmedo looked into his eyes for some time in earnest silence. "Show sorrow for your black behaviour and you may still be saved." The friar went on his knees and with authority in his voice, he said: "Prepare your confession."

Esquivel knelt down, but his soul remained hard and unrepentant beneath the gestures of penitence and remorse.

Later still, in the quiet of the night, Alonso read his mother's letters. They brought him heart-rending echoes of those days which seemed as if they had been lived on another planet. "You may well imagine how lonely I was left by your father's departure from this earth. The good friar helps me to live, though his own health is none too good; but my chief standby, next to the Lord's mercy, is that you live, though unable to send me tidings of what you do, and that some day, the Lord will bring you back. If I did not believe this, I do not think I would have the strength to live. I must not forget old Suárez, who has remained by my side right through."

He read this page over and over again, marvelling at the strength of that maternal faith, feeling he had not deserved it, for he had not striven hard enough to return and find out how his parents were living. "It was a miracle to me that the Lord gave me power to bear having to leave Torremala—your Torremala, the house in which you were born—to utter strangers. Many pitied me, and some perhaps with a lining of pleasure to their pity, for what they saw as a humiliation. But I did not feel that way, I knew only too well that when your father set eyes on me, I was little better than an outcast—and had I not been your mother I would have returned to my obscurity with a feeling of relief. God knows what trials await me yet, not because I am a humble rabbi's daughter, but because I am a Manrique. I shall bear them cheerfully for your sake. I long to have occasion to bear them. All I have heard makes me feel that on the day I shall be able to show a letter from you, those who are now sitting on your chairs and sleeping on your bed will not forget my origin and will not fail to slander me so as to keep what is not theirs. Old Esquivel and his daughter are already busy at this."

Alonso frowned and grew sombre. "What! Could people be so despicable? Would they accuse his mother of secret Jewish practices in order to retain the property of Torremala? But in that case, if such a danger existed, his mother was perhaps already in an Inquisition dungeon, for by now she must have received the letter he had sent her through Montejo nearly a year earlier."

Xuchitl observed him in silence. She was lying in bed while he sat reading the papers by the light of a candle. "You look so sad! Is it bad news?" He heard her voice with a shock of all his being and came back with some difficulty from Torremala to Tenochtitlán. Xuchitl—his mother. What a distance! What a stretch of space! Beware of love for it is a wide, wide sea! Yes. A wide sea indeed which bathed such far-flung continents of affection as his mother and.

Xuchitl. "Sad news, yes." He felt the need of opening his heart. But how could he explain the situation to Xuchitl? He had to begin so far back! . . .

"You see, my love, I must explain that my mother was born a Jewess." Xuchitl sprang on to her knees. "Alonso! You never told me before!" And with a voice ringing with the most devoted emotion, she knelt at his feet and hid her face in his knees. "The people in whose midst the Lord was born! You, Alonso, you have blood from that holy people in your veins! Oh let me kiss your feet as Magdalen kissed the Lord's!"

Alonso had tears in his eyes. How could he explain to her the position which the Jews occupied in Christendom, their dispersion, the ghettos, the expulsion from Spain, the distrust in which the converted Jews were held, the persecution, the Inquisition, the flames? . . . Meanwhile she looked at him in ecstasy, just because he was half-Jewish and wondering why he did not seem to enter into his part as a member of the people elected by God. As she sat at his feet, drinking in his features which she knew so well, his lofty forehead, his golden hair, his clear-cut eyebrows and deep blue eyes and his straight nose, the set mouth clearly drawn and his fair beard, she had a feeling that Jesus might have looked like him—must have looked like him. She had never before tried to imagine Jesus visually. She would not be able to do so in the future without thinking of the face she loved. How sad that face was now!

"Yes, my soul," he said, laying his hand on her head, "it was a glorious privilege for the Jewish people to be chosen to incarnate the Spirit, but they have paid for it ever since in tears and blood. Perhaps also," he added pensively, "they had been chosen because their sins were heavier than those of other peoples. I had never thought of these things before. Many of them followed Jesus as soon as they heard His voice, and even more when they saw His works. But many Jews remained obdurate and as they took upon themselves the responsibility of crucifying Him, the world has hated them since."

"The Christian world?" she asked. "But Christ preached love. How can Christians hate?"

He was silent for a while. "We do not call Christians those who are worthy of Christ but only those who try . . . sometimes."

Her mind was in travail. She had welcomed these strangers who cleansed the gory chapels of Witchilopochtli and worshipped a Mother and a Child; she had welcomed them with all her soul, eager for reason, tenderness, peace, love. But she had seen a crowd of these Christians rush into the teocalli and attack the unarmed dancers in the yard; and now she learned that the whole of Christendom kept alive a hatred based on events which had happened fifteen hundred

years earlier. She was not analysing all these facts. She was just feeling them. They were fermenting in her, upsetting the peace of mind which she thought she had acquired for ever when she had made that marvellous discovery—a religion based on love. And yet she felt drawn more and more closely to Alonso. An obscure instinct told her that he felt like her; that under his faith lurked the doubt and sorrow which had made so poignant to her certain scenes and sayings of the life of Christ himself—yes and of the life of her own father, King Nezawal Pilli. And as she let her head rest on his knees, she was beginning to adumbrate that the essence of Christianity was perhaps in the yearning for perfection rather than in perfection, and in the longing for love rather than in love.

13

Cortés wrote to the Chapter of the Town of Veracruz which he had founded on the coast, informing them of his safe arrival and assuring them that the capital would soon be pacified. He was sure his moral authority and his military strength would soon reduce the rebels to obedience. His messenger left at dawn next morning.

But within an hour of his departure the messenger returned pale, his clothes torn, blood pouring from a stone-wound in his forehead. The town was in revolt. As the messenger spoke, Cortés and Alonso, who was with him, could hear a clamour rising in the streets outside, and above it all the shrill war-cry of the men of Tenochtitlán. They rushed to the walls. The Mexicans were attacking the fortress round its whole perimeter. The fight was fierce and lasted the whole day. The Spanish guns pounded at the mass of besiegers without even aiming and mowed down their ranks, but the ranks were promptly replenished by eager warriors. The waves of attackers succeeded in reaching the walls and tried first to destroy them; but the walls resisted their onslaught. The Mexicans then tried to climb them and for hours persisted in the attempt, till there were enough dead to make the climbing easier over their bodies. But the Spaniards resisted successfully and when night fell and, following the native tradition, hostilities were suspended, the exhausted Spaniards within heard the shouts of defiance and contempt which the valorous Mexicans hurled at them to prevent them from sleeping: "Our pots and pans are ready with fomato and axi to cook your bodies in!"

Some priests of Witchilopochtli had come to see Alonso during the night to propose peace on condition that Cuiclahuac, Moteczuma's brother, who had been a prisoner of Cortés since his conspiracy with Cacama, should be released. Cortés agreed and the priests took

Cuitlahuac away under cover of night. They needed him as the only person with enough authority to call the Council of the People together. That is precisely what Cuitlahuac did as soon as he was free. The offer of peace had been but a stratagem. The Council deposed Moteczuma and elected Cuitlahuac, who immediately decided to press on with the war.

Next morning the attack began at dawn in perfect order. Each unit had its commander, its banners, its conches and drums. Cuitlahuac in person took command. After repeated attempts on the lines of the day before, the Mexicans struck on a more effective plan: they shot volleys of incendiary arrows at the fortress. The main building, made of stone, withstood this attack; but its garrison was choked by the flames of the sheds and palisades of the Tlaxcatec quarters in the yard. Cortés gave order to knock down part of the wall to stem the progress of the fire. The breach thus made in his defences was most dangerous, but he covered it with his artillery. He himself at the head of his cavalry made a sortie and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy. The houses in the streets which surrounded the palace-fortress had to be burnt down, to put an end to the volleys of stones hurled at them from the terraces. In spite of the losses which the artillery and the cavalry of the Spaniards caused the Mexicans, the disproportion between the two forces was so great—at least one hundred to one—that when night fell, despite their toil, the Spaniards had made no headway and the situation was just as bad as or worse than at dawn.

Cortés tried to make use of Moteczuma's authority. The unfortunate monarch had been deposed as Priest-Commander-in-Chief, and knew it. He was humiliated and full of resentment. None of his hopes, none of his ambitions, had come to fruition. He spent his days in dejected solitude and his nights snatching moments of sleep between agitated, cruel nightmares. "What does Malintzin want of me? I am no longer anybody," he said to Alonso who had come to negotiate with him. Alonso did not realise the import of these words, which he took metaphorically, as the expression of a mood, rather than as what they were, the expression of a fact. Patience and persuasion won over Moteczuma's reluctance, and at last the emperor, clad in his imperial robes, with his blue mantle and diadem, his three gold-sticks in waiting and his suite of Mexican notables, appeared on the parapet. A sudden silence fell over the crowd of warriors. The insignia of office, the majesty of colour, dress and mien, had their effect. He spoke to the crowd: "Brothers, cease fighting. I am not a prisoner. The White Men are my guests. They are leaving us soon. Fight no more. Go home in peace."

A young man with a fiery eye and commanding mien, wearing the

mantle and insignia of the highest warriors, Cuauhtemoc, nephew of Moteczuma, stepped forward and in the dead silence shouted : " You miserable hen, wife of the White Men, here is what you deserve ! " and he shot an arrow at Moteczuma. The arrow missed. A volley of stones followed, three of which struck the emperor, who fell unconscious. As they saw the sacred figure collapse, the Mexicans, seized with holy terror, vanished from sight.

In the empty square Cuauhtemoc remained alone, resting on his bow.

14

With Moteczuma's death the war gathered a fresh impetus. His ambiguous attitude and his moral authority had kept many important Mexicans in a hesitating state of mind. The whole nation was now united in a common endeavour to save its faith and independence. The Great Teocalli opposite the palace of Axayacatl was one of the strongholds of the Mexican attack. It dominated the palace with its height of nearly one hundred and fifty feet from which stones and arrows were continually being thrown at the Spaniards. After fruitless attempts at storming it by one of his officers, Cortés made up his mind to lead the assault in person with a number of picked men and Alonso as his second.

They started on horseback to force a way through the courtyard of the temple, thronged with warriors, but as the horses slipped and some fell on the stone slabs, Cortés and his companions dismounted, sent the horses back and fought their way through the armed crowd. Cortés, whose left hand was wounded, had had his buckler tied to his arm. They fought their way up the one hundred and thirteen steps and over the narrow platforms which separated each flight from the next, till, not without heavy losses, they reached the top, where a crowd of picked Mexicans awaited them. The combatants below struck a tacit armistice to witness the astonishing fight above. Xuchitl, with the other native ladies of the Spanish army, was watching the fight from one of the terraces of the palace. Alonso, her life, was in the furnace. She had followed the ascent of the bold troop of Spaniards with an atrocious tension of her heart. Every now and then they disappeared round the mound, as they advanced on the narrow platform between one flight and the next, and she wondered whether they would reappear again at the next turn, and if then Alonso would still be one of them. He was. He was again. It was fast becoming a symbolical fight in her eyes. Who was to win that top, that apex of spiritual power ? Was Witchilopochtli or the Cross to remain erect

on top of that strategic mount? The fight went on and now and then a Spaniard, more often a Mexican, at times a Mexican and a Spaniard in a deadly embrace, fell over the edge of the temple to be dashed to pieces on the slabs below. At last, after an agony which seemed to have lasted a lifetime, the Spaniards were left alone in possession of the top and Xuchitl saw Alonso, Cortés and their companions fall on their knees amongst the wounded and the dead. The Cross had won.

15

Fighting went on for days. The positions conquered during the day were lost during the night. The Spaniards were not numerous enough to man them. Food stores were running out and the daily ration had been reduced to fifty grains of maize. The time had come for the most painful decisions. Cortés had to eat his pride and organise a retreat—indeed a flight. He faced the ordeal and took the decision.

One night the Spanish soldiers were summoned to the biggest hall in the palace. The centre of the floor was glistening under the light of Mexican torches and Christian candles with all the jewels of Moteczuma's treasure. At the head of the room a long table of Spanish style, at which sat the crown officials, pen in hand, paper waiting. On both sides, standing and armed, Cortés and his captains. Round the room, in serried ranks, the soldiers, all but those who were on duty as sentinels. "Sir Treasurer, Sir Notary Royal," said Cortés, "I called you and all these gentlemen together for you to bear witness that we must leave this city as best we can, and that I place at your disposal the king's fifth on all this treasure; and to convey it I will let you have a mare of my own which, though wounded in a hind leg, is strong enough to carry the load." The officers wrote it all down in as long-winded a style as possible (for they were paid by the folio) and then Cortés added: "As for the rest, I can do nothing. I am not in a position to have it transported. Nor am I in a position to prevent any one from helping himself."

The green-eyed, yellow-skinned demon of cupidity stole into the soldiers' hearts. They looked at each other. "Has he really said it? Does he really mean it? . . ." And they came forward, shy first, eager later, with avid hands which explored, grasped, let go, selected and at last conveyed jewels and precious stones to the doublets, the hose, the helmets, every possible hollow which could be found or improvised. The wise and expert soldiers were content with stones of great value in little bulk; the less wise waxed voluminous and heavy, and so ballasted themselves for death.

On the heap Esquivel (freed through the timely intervention of Father Olmedo) saw the heart of jade which he had given Moteczuma. He grasped it eagerly and hid it under his cotton-lined war-jacket.

16

The hour for their escape struck at last. Sandoval, who was to command the vanguard, stole out of the fortress with his company of Spaniards and a few hundreds of Tlaxcatec warriors, escorting forty tlamemes who carried a portable bridge to pass the numerous gaps on the causeway. Cortés had chosen the causeway which led to Tacuba, the shortest way across the water. The rear was to be commanded by Alvarado and Velázquez de León. Cortés himself would command the centre with Alonso as his second in command. The women were also in the centre under the protection of a strong body of Tlaxcatecs.

All went well till Sandoval had passed the first gap in the causeway. Then the Mexican night-scouts gave the alarm and, despite their traditions, the Mexicans rushed out into the night to cut the Spaniards' retreat. From that moment on the passage of the Spaniards, of their auxiliaries and of their baggage along the narrow causeway became a string of dramatic encounters, most of them at the deadly gaps in the causeway, where the Mexicans concentrated their efforts from the water, swarming into the channels with their canoes and causing havoc, panic and death to man, woman and horse. There were places which the late-arrived crossed over the dead bodies of those who had preceded them. Cortés galloped to and fro all the way more than once for a good part of the night. Alonso had no idea where Xuchitl was and had to attend to his military duties with a heart heavy with anxiety. He had managed to have both Long Face and Antonio detailed to the women's escort and this fact gave him some comfort and confidence. When the little band of women arrived at the last gap, they found of course no bridge. A horse was lying head down in the water, with his hind legs on the edge of the causeway, and the foot of the horseman could still be seen in the stirrup, while the rest of the body was hidden in a mass of upset canoes, baggage and dead bodies of Christians and natives, making up a kind of platform. Standing on this platform on one side were three Spanish soldiers keeping Indians at bay with their spears; on the other side another Spanish soldier was trying to draw to himself an empty canoe which stood some three feet away; on the far edge of the gap a line of Spanish soldiers was fighting with a body of Mexicans who held the passage. The Spanish soldier succeeded in getting hold of the canoe with his spear. He leapt on to it and gave a kick back to get away from the causeway, but as his foot was still in

the air, he was struck in the face with a powerful thrust. Antonio, who had seen all, had knocked him into the water with a spear. He took hold of the canoe and deposited Xuchitl, Doña Marina and Doña Elvira in it, together with three daughters of Moteczuma whom the emperor had entrusted to Cortés, and last but not least, Citlali. Then he ordered Long Face to row them over. He had meant to remain on the causeway but changed his mind and leapt into the canoe: "I'd better go with you in case you are attacked on the water."

The canoe left for the shore. The soldier Antonio had knocked down was splashing in the water shouting "Confession!" Antonio seized hold of his arm. "Come on, old man, I will confess you all right. I am sure you need it badly." It was laborious, but Long Face was an expert and kept his canoe well-balanced. One could see nothing but shadows and silhouettes for the night was dark. They were lucky in the fact that Long Face knew the lake blindfold. But the soldier spoke. "If ever I catch the dog who knocked me down——" And before Antonio had had time to take up the challenge, Long Face said in the dark: "Is that you, Esquivel?" "Yes," answered a gruff voice. And Antonio: "Vicente Esquivel, I suppose." "Yes," repeated the gruff voice. "Then, let me tell you who knocked you down. Antonio Bermúdez, who curses the moment he fished out of the water such a liar and a good for nothing as the like of you."

17

When they were within a few yards of the shore, Long Face asked Antonio: "What is that shadow there on your side? . . . There on the water . . . Seems to be moving too . . ." Antonio was studying it. "Too big for a man. It must be a horse." Long Face drew nearer. "Yes. It is a horse . . . Let us go ashore first, though." He wanted to get rid of the women, for he had recognised Alonso's horse. But by this time Xuchitl had realised the whole position. "It is our horse," she cried. "Oh! . . ." She could say no more.

As soon as they landed, Antonio ran towards the causeway in search of news, while the little band of women, escorted by Long Face, threaded their way through the dark streets of the town towards the *teocalli* where Long Face guessed most of the fugitives would have congregated. Alonso had rushed back with Cortés and a number of foot-soldiers from Tacuba, where they had arrived safely, to open the last gap held by the Mexicans who had taken possession of it again after they had passed. The two horses had sufficed to put the enemies to flight, but Alonso was unable to hold in his spirited mount and had fallen into the water. The horse had disappeared and he found himself

lying most uncomfortably, with a sharp pain on the left side of his chest, which rested on the stone edge of the causeway. A canoe full of Indian warriors was drawing near. He heard them comment on their good luck: "A good prey for the gods!" said one. "And a good morsel for the next day!" said another. A nervous hand seized his left foot and pulled hard. The pain in his chest became so acute that he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was in a room he did not know, spacious and dark. He was lying on a couch on the floor. A torch was burning behind him and a window was open at his feet, but no light came from it. By his couch, kneeling on the floor, was . . . who was there? . . . was it Xuchitl? . . . yes it was Xuchitl smiling at him, but of course, he must be dreaming.

"How do you feel?" she asked. A slight, very slight pink shade came to quicken the dead blue-black of the sky-screen he could see through the window. The dawn. He had a headache and a feeling of sickness; but the worst was the pain in his side. The surgeon came and examined him. He was pale, wrinkled and dusty, showing signs of exhaustion. He had been trying to bandage wounds without bandages, to operate without instruments and to cure without medicines during the whole night. "Sir Don Alonso," he blurted out with friendly bluntness, "two ribs broken and possibly a third. I am sorry you cannot remain in bed for a month. Take some pulque and . . . have you saved your horse?" Xuchitl, who was already able to speak some Spanish, answered for him. The horse was saved. "I hope it is wounded," said the surgeon. "Yes, it is," answered Xuchitl, rather surprised. "Excellent. Otherwise it would have been allotted to a fighting man. We must be on the road again in a few hours. You must travel on the back of the horse, lying down."

When Alonso had drunk some pulque he wanted to know what had happened. Xuchitl lifted a curtain and Gallego appeared with his woollen cap in his hand. "Well, sir," began the grateful soldier, "I am glad to see you here. Those accursed heathens had already prepared——" He looked at Xuchitl and thought better to suppress the gruesome detail of the pot full of tomatoes and axi which had been awaiting for Alonso's body in the kitchen. "It looked pretty bad. I was fighting with water up to my knee, standing God knows on what, may He forgive me for it, when I heard them and saw you and then I remembered my lady's sweet words when she saved my life and I said to myself, 'this is your opportunity,' and I drew my knife and cut his hand off, you know the hand which had got hold of your foot, and I dragged you by your feet, for as you had fainted you could not feel the pain anyhow, and then I met the general and he and I laid you on his horse and we both had to fight our way through two knots of

heathens before we succeeded in bringing you here. And by the way, sir, I found this which you dropped on the causeway as I was dragging you." And Gallego handed Alonso the Heart of Jade.

18

The melancholy remnants of the erstwhile proud army of conquerors wound its way towards Tlaxcala through the upper reaches of the Sierra. The wounded who could not walk were conveyed on the back of wounded horses. Food was not plentiful, weapons were scarce, there was no powder for fire-arms and all hearts were saddened by the loss of so many friends. Danger was the only stimulant left, and there was no lack of it. The enemy gave the fugitives but a very short respite, after which Cortés noticed disquieting lights in the hills and gave orders that even the wounded horses should be allotted to fighting men, for he needed all the cavalry he could muster, both for fighting and for scouting purposes. Alonso was deprived of his none too comfortable conveyance. He was still in acute pain. Long Face tried to carry him on his back, but the surgeon vetoed the proposal. Then Long Face remembered Alonso's "invention" of the stretcher. He improvised one there and then with two discarded spears and some cotton wraps. Xuchitl and Citlali walked beside him.

As they passed the crest which separated them from the valley of Otumba, the Spaniards found the plain covered with their relentless enemies. Their own numbers had been cut down by defeat to about four hundred. Nearly a thousand of them had perished during the siege and flight. When Antonio saw the Mexican army, whose serried battalions stood in perfect order behind the banners of their respective chiefs, his heart was seized with concern for the wounded man. A brave man himself, and eager to win honour during the brief respite which his terrible disease had granted him, he longed to be in the fight. But he felt that his duty bound him to Alonso and to Xuchitl. From the terrace of a *teocalli* on the slope of the hill he followed the dramatic incidents of the fateful battle with a full knowledge of what the issue implied for his own skin and for his friends. There were no more than twenty-three horsemen, all wounded and most of them riding horses also wounded. There was no gunpowder and most of the crossbows had been lost or broken. The army therefore—but for its horses—had to rely on the same weapons as the Mexicans. The valley seemed as if a heavy snowfall had covered it, for the Mexican warriors were all clad in their thick cotton war-jackets, spotlessly white. Here and there glistening feathers and golden insignia shone in the sun.

The Mexicans fought with vigour and determination in a battle

which, they had every right to think, would be the last and would free them for ever from the presence of the overbearing strangers. But the staying power and determination of the Spaniards and the gift of leadership which distinguished Cortés were mighty weapons in their favour, and moreover they had on their side the incomparable force of their faith.

Yet though faith move mountains, it has to fight for it. The Spaniards fell on their enemies time and again only to find that while they were few and could not replace their dead and wounded, the Mexicans were numberless and came back after every onslaught with a renewed vigour and, to all appearances, undiminished in their overwhelming mass. After hours of fighting, the Spaniards were beginning to flag through sheer exhaustion. Cortés' horse had been wounded and he had mounted another one, a big heavy animal from the baggage train. He was beginning to wonder how he would be able to shake off that endless host, when in the distance he saw a gorgeous sight which made his heart rejoice: the Captain-General of the Mexican army, borne on a litter, tossed aloft above his fighting ranks, brilliantly clad and wearing a glistening crest of feathers, gold and precious stones, and a short flagstaff tied to his back, with the banner of gold-net which was one of the insignia of his rank. He was the Serpent-Woman of the Aztecs. Cortés called a few trusted horsemen to his support and rushed straight to the litter which, well-defended though it was, he was soon able to approach, and with a vigorous thrust of his spear he threw the Serpent-Woman down. One of his companions, Juan de Salamanca, dismounted, killed the gorgeously clad chief and handed his golden flag to Cortés. The Mexicans were seized with panic and fled.

19

As they were approaching Tlaxcala, the Spaniards saw the colourful procession of the four tlatoanis of the friendly republic coming towards them. They brought them loads of hens which were a welcome contribution, for the army was ravenous. The next day Alonso was comfortably installed in Xicotencatl's palace with all his household.

Cortés lost no time in recriminations over the past or in doubts about the future. He was of well-tempered steel. He could be bent but he would not break. He began to prepare his second conquest of Tenochtitlán. A number of ships arrived from the islands, bringing welcome reinforcements of men and material. One of them brought also a large mail from Spain, including a letter from Alonso's mother.

Alonso was in his room, which opened out on to a sun-flooded terrace in the palace. The letter was brought to him by Xuchitl,

happy to see the writing which by now she knew well. Her progress in Spanish had been quick enough to allow her to hear the letter read aloud and understand every word of it.

"I wept with joy—and I am still weeping with joy as I write this—when the Lord at last rewarded my faith with your letter bringing me tidings of your life and adventures. I was sure that the Lord had preserved you for His service even though I had misunderstood His intention and had wished you to be a priest. Your father was right. You were meant for a knightly life, yet I was not wrong, for you were meant to be a knight of Christ. I guessed only too well what the result of your return would be. I feared it so much that I kept silent about the wonderful news that you were alive, thinking it was better that it should not be known till you yourself were here in person to face the issue and of course defeat the poor misguided adversary. But your adventures are so striking that everybody here is full of them, and so the tidings that you were alive reached the ears of your cousin, the usurper of your domain. The prior has told me that I have been denounced to the Inquisition as a secret Jewess and that my denouncers give it as a strong conjecture that I have brought you up in the Jewish faith. There are many stories put about by Marta Esquivel about you being a sorcerer and how you disappeared once from an altar which they had made to adore you in those parts, and how you have a magic stone which you always wear round your neck." Alonso looked up from the letter to Xuchitl. Her eyes were full of tears. "Read on," she whispered. "The good prior does not like the look of things and fears they may imprison me. But I am so full of joy that nothing else matters to me and I long to see you."

This letter upset him deeply. Obviously there was a conspiracy between the Esquivels and Manrique de Lara. Vicente Esquivel had evidently supplied them with useful, slanderous reports by some of the ships which Narváez had brought to Veracruz, and old and new stories were being blended together and transformed in a way which, as he knew only too well, opened out far more dangerous perspectives than the mere loss of his estate. He was heartbroken to think that, instead of sharing in the coming campaigns, he would have to hasten back to Spain to free his mother from the clutches of his miserable enemies. How bitterly did he feel the injustice inherent in the fact that he had Jewish blood and as such was always liable to suspicion of being a secret worshipper of the faith of Moses! He disliked having to disclose the matter to Cortés. Though by no means a narrow-minded bigot, Cortés was an Old Christian and proud of it, and Alonso did not know how he would react in depth, even though he felt sure of his chief's outward courtesy. Yet, what could he do? He must go through with it.

The general was friendly and sympathetic. "There is hardly a man in the company," he said in a cordial and earnest tone, "that I could spare less than you. But a mother is a sacred thing and my lady doña Isabel is alone. Leave as soon as you wish. And mark my words : If you are successful in your endeavours the estate of King Nezawal Pilli will be yours. I will have none of his sons. They are all unruly, irresponsible young men."

Alonso was grateful and yet, in his sensitive soul, those words of Cortés, indispensable though he felt them to be, were to rankle for ever : "If you are successful in your endeavours . . ."

And if calumny and injustice were to prevail ?

PART XV

SILENCE OVER THE LAGOON

I

WHEN Alonso was restored to health, the dilemma stood before his mind still unsolved despite the friendly words of Cortés : was he to return to Spain to the rescue of his mother ? Was he to remain and see the conquest through ? In the end he decided to stay. His reasons for doing so sprang from depths in him which he had not fathomed. He gave Xuchitl an explanation which reflected his own estimate of them : "You see, this can only be a test of my faith in God Who brought me here, gave you to me, and put me in this position of honour and trust in His service. I have thought it over many a night. I feel certain that the Lord will protect my mother while I serve Him here."

That day Cortés was organising one of his most dramatic and picturesque enterprises. He had had thirteen brigantines built in Tlaxcala to be launched in the lagoon, over seventy miles away, beyond the mountain passes. The ships had been built in parts under the direction of a master-builder and shipwright of Cortés' army. Cortés was choosing the men to put in charge of the transportation. Alonso heard of this and went to see him. Surprised but pleased, Cortés accepted Alonso's offer to take charge of the expedition. Most of the escort was to consist of Tlaxcatec warriors under Chichimecateuhli. Cortés was therefore glad to have a captain who had mastered the native language in command of the whole. He himself, with a strong contingent of Spaniards and auxiliaries, left for Tetzcuco a few days in advance. In a series of campaigns he had secured the loyalty of a

wide belt of land round the lagoon, which enabled him to besiege Tenochtitlán without fear of being besieged himself by a wider circle of enemies. He rightly thought that the thirteen ships would be a most valuable asset for the siege.

Alonso started a few days later. He had one hundred Spaniards in the vanguard with ten thousand Tlaxcatecs preceding two thousand tlamemes who carried the ships' pieces, and another two thousand loaded with food for the expedition, and as a reserve to relieve their more heavily loaded comrades. Another war force of ten thousand Tlaxcatecs closed the rearguard. He took command of this force, entrusting the vanguard to Chichimecatecuhtli.

They took four days to cover the seventy miles. The Mexicans were ambushed in the more dangerous passes in the hope of doing them some harm, but on seeing their strength and the well-appointed order of the expedition, they were content to whistle and boo and insult them. Chichimecatecuhtli, an impetuous young man, was all for fighting. But Alonso took the matter more calmly and preferred to waste no time and run no risks.

On the second night they camped close to a small deserted settlement. Alonso chose the local *teocalli* as his headquarters. When his multifarious duties as commander-in-chief of such a complex expedition had been performed, he visited the shrines on top of the sacred mound. It was a dark night. He had taken a slice of *ocotl* with him, though without lighting it, for he had forbidden lights in the open to his army. As the heavy curtain which closed the entrance fell behind him, he struck a light with his flint and set the *ocotl* alight. The shrine was spacious but the flames of the burning torch seemed to increase its size and to stretch its height to colossal dimensions. The usual huge *Witchilopochtli* rose on the altar, grinning and gruesome. But the offerings before the war-god were somewhat less usual. There were two horses, so perfectly stuffed and reconstituted that for a moment, in the weird, sensitive environment which the flames seemed to create, he thought them alive. Hanging from the altar, in a sinister row, he saw four Spanish faces, the skin, hair, beard, facial features and eyes of four Spaniards, set in relief with an astonishing vigour and vivacity. He beheld them with a deep emotion. Martyrs? he asked himself, in that questioning mood to which every dramatic incident of the conquest was apt to throw him. One of those masks had an earnest, spiritual expression. The other three were just soldiers, gold-women-wine-and-cards soldiers. He had known them well. He left that religious den with a revived anguish in his heart and went down to his quarters. A few soldiers were waiting for him to lead him to a rich house in which they had been billeted, on the marble walls of which they had found a pathetic farewell written in block letters with charcoal by one of the

victims : " Here lived the unfortunate Juan Yuste. May God have pity on his soul."

2

Cuitlahuac, Moteczuma's successor, had been much elated by the flight of the Spaniards. He was sure that Witchilopochtli had had the last word and that Tenochtitlán was now free of the foreign invaders for good and all. His heart was filled with gratitude towards the powerful war-god, so that when he learnt that about eighty Spaniards had been found and caught alive in Axayacatl's palace after Cortés' flight, he did not hesitate for a moment : " Let us sacrifice them straight away to Witchilopochtli." He gave orders for the ceremony to take place the next day.

That evening Papantzin came to see him. She had remained in the background, as she had done all her life. Cuitlahuac was surprised to see her. With her sweet yet firm voice and countenance she said : " Brother, I come to warn you. Make no mistake. I have heard your thoughts in the still of night, and I tell you : beware ! "

Cuitlahuac liked his sister, but he resented her words as a challenge to his authority and as an encouragement to Fate to turn against him. For Fate's ears were always open to the worst suggestions let loose by men. " Why do you come to tempt Fate with your airy words ? " he asked. " My words are not airy," she retorted without losing any of her quiet composure. She was wearing a black huipil and on her chest Cuitlahuac noticed a jewel he had never seen before : a cross of gold. " Listen to my words. The Whites have not gone for ever. They will come back and they will win this city. The temples of Witchilopochtli will be demolished and this sign . . ." she touched the cross on her chest with her long, thin fingers, " will win. It is time still. Come over to us and save Tenochtitlán from destruction."

He frowned. " You are uttering words of blasphemy. Were you not my sister, I would have you stretched on the sacred stone. Leave my presence and speak to no one of this visit, so that no one knows I have tolerated your impious prattle."

She cast a last sad glance on her brother and by way of farewell said : " Oh brother, I grieve for you. A terrible punishment awaits you for your obduracy."

He shrugged his shoulders. " Women," he thought, " are always caught by new fashions." He was ill at ease and felt a pain in his throat. " That comes from allowing such nonsense to be spoken in my presence." He decided to drink lime-water with chili, an infallible remedy for sore throat, and thought no more about it.

3

Next day the thanksgiving ceremony took place in the Great Teocalli. Cuitlahuac had himself conveyed to the temple in all pomp and majesty, in the most sumptuous litter of the Crown. The victims were standing in a row at the foot of the main stairs. They had all had the funeral lock cut off from the top of their head and nearly all had drunk the generous measure of pulque granted to those about to die. The emperor arrived. The pathway was covered with blue royal carpets, and he stepped out of the litter. As he set foot on the ground of the teocalli he felt giddy and sick. He mastered the feeling. A robust acolyte was offering his back to take him up to the top. Cuitlahuac cast a glance at the long file of his eighty victims, and his thoughts involuntarily went back to his sister Papantzin. He let himself be carried to the top where he meant to stand by the cuauxicalli or sacred dish and to brandish the sacrificial knife himself as the Emperor Ahuitzotl, one of his predecessors, had once done, when the queues of the victims stretched as far back as the outskirts of Tenochtitlán. This time they were only eighty and not twenty thousand, but they were sure to be more acceptable to Witchilopochtli. Cuitlahuac was the more worried and humiliated to find that his body did not seem to respond to his will. He made a heroic effort, stood by the stone facing the high priest and a number of lesser ones and gave the signal for the sacrifice to begin. The queue of Spanish victims had already wound its way up to the top—haggard faces, some dejected and in tears, others tense with repressed fury, others contrite as if ready to meet the Austere Judge Who cannot be deceived. The first to arrive was seized by the priests and laid on the stone. Cuitlahuac was holding the obsidian knife which the high priest had put in his imperial hand. He raised it with a violent effort of his arm—his hand was seen trembling in the air for a while, then the whole imperial body fell backwards like a mass of lead on the hard slabs of the temple amidst the innumerable fragments of the broken obsidian knife which the sun turned into a dust of light.

The captives fell on their knees thanking the Lord for their delivery ; the Mexicans were terror-struck by the anger of their war-lord. Meanwhile, in the feverish veins and arteries of the fallen emperor, unperturbed by either faith, myriads of busy microbes were faithfully performing the function assigned to them in the scheme of nature : spreading small-pox amongst the high and low of mankind.

4

The emperor was taken home unconscious. The magicians who came to see him found his head burning and his heart thumping fast. They were not familiar with the complaint and began to suspect that it was god-ordained, like all complaints, of course, but more especially so. When the pustules appeared on the skin, the magicians were left in no doubt about the divine character of the disease and, not being able to cure it, they gave it a name—the Divine Pock. A few days later the emperor died.

The tribal council appointed as successor Cuauhtemoc, the young prince who had shot the first arrow at Moteczuma. His first orders were : to prepare for war against the Spaniards and to sacrifice the eighty White captives to Witchilopochtli. Papantzin did not know this youngster, a distant cousin of hers ; and in view of her failure with her brother, although she had been so brilliantly vindicated by the Divine Powers, she abstained this time from tendering unsolicited advice. But the high priest came to call on Cuauhtemoc, pale with fear, to explain to the new emperor what had actually happened when his predecessor had raised his hand against the men of Quetzalcoatl. "It will not happen this time," retorted the young monarch in a dry, contemptuous voice. The high priest, despite his old age, was heartened by the youthful chief. His voice was the voice of staunch faith.

The eighty captives were sacrificed. Cuauhtemoc himself slew the first and many of the others. And as the bodies of the gory victims tumbled down the steps of the *teocalli*, the crowd of warriors below felt that they had at last a leader favoured by the gods.

5

The siege began the next day.

Cortés had divided his army into three captaincies, reserving for himself the command of the brigantines. Alonso remained attached to the commander-in-chief. He had left Xuchitl in Tetzcuco, where little if any fighting was expected. Under the spirited command of Cuauhtemoc the city put up an admirable defence both against the three forces which closed all the causeways converging on the island-city, and against the brigantines which blockaded it by water. The chief obstacle to the progress of the Spaniards was the number of gaps in the causeways, as now the wooden bridges had been destroyed by the besieged. It was relatively easy for the Spaniards to control and permanently build up the gaps between the edge of the lagoon and

the outskirts of the city, but when the causeways actually penetrated into the town and became streets flanked by houses and public buildings, every one of which was an island-fortress, the advance of the besiegers became slow and precarious. Alonso had been transferred by Cortés to Alvarado's force, and Xuchitl prevailed upon him to let her come over to Tacuba and live in Alvarado's headquarters, where she could follow the daily fighting almost within striking distance.

It was here that one afternoon, after weeks of stubborn daily fighting, Xuchitl, with Citlali as her only companion, was able to follow from her terrace every phase of the disaster which overtook the Spanish forces. All she saw was the spirited advance of a crowd of Tlaxcatec warriors, shouting and gesticulating wildly, followed by a force of Spanish horsemen and foot-soldiers, right to the very centre of the town. It looked almost as if the siege were going to end that very afternoon. Suddenly the wave was reversed and the Tlaxcatecs began to retreat in a confusion, which soon became a rout. What omen, vision, cloud, word, imagination, made the brave warriors suddenly lose courage? No one knows to this day. There was no space in which to resist. The Spaniards sought to retreat behind the gap—about twelve paces wide—but the slender bridge crashed under the weight of the first horse, and soon the water was filled with Indian, Christian and horse, many of whom were drowned, for the lagoon was fully three fathoms deep on that spot. Cortés who, with a group of horsemen, was fighting nearby, tried in vain to work his way to the rescue of his exposed troops. From her terrace, Xuchitl could see Alonso amongst the few captains who fought beside their chief. The double-edged obsidian swords shone murderously in the sun and fell with terrific impetus on horse and man. Alonso's horse was lamed. Another fell with a wide gash on its side and the horseman disappeared into the scrimmage below. While Xuchitl was trying anxiously to see where that horseman had gone, her own disappeared. Where was he? She seized Citlali's hand. "Where is he?" Citlali had seen it all—all that could be seen from that distance—and could hardly speak. A Mexican warrior had dealt the horse a deadly blow from behind, between the legs with a long spear fitted with a good Spanish sword, one of the many lost by the Spaniards during their disastrous escape from Tenochtitlán. The horse fell backwards and Alonso with it. Four Mexicans had taken hold of him. Citlali saw no more. A wall of horsemen and Indians blocked the scene. Behind that wall one of the Indians who held Alonso had been slain by Cortés' own hand, but Cortés' horse fell dead and he himself was seized by a powerful Mexican warrior. One of Cortés' guardsmen came forward and, with a violent stroke of his sword, cut off the Indian's hand. Cortés was free and for a few seconds went about with the now dead hand still holding his arm, till

it fell to the earth which claimed it as it does all dead matter. Another horse was offered him. He mounted it and looked around with anguished eyes to find out where Alonso was. Alonso had vanished.

6

Towards sunset the rays of the sun fell on the chief *teocalli*, and the Spanish army, just recovered from their hot encounter, noticed an unusual crowd on the upper platform of the temple. The chapels of *Witchilopochtli* and *Tetzcatlipuca* remained shut, but the *tlapan wewetl*, the sacred drum, rent the air with its lugubrious sound, and rows upon rows of black-robed priests came with solemn steps to occupy their seats in a square leaving a central space empty for a ceremony which no one could doubt would be gruesome. Every Spaniard knew what it meant. Soon they were able to see their comrades, those who had fallen alive into the hands of their enemies, arrive at the top. It seemed to the soldiers looking on from the distant terraces that their gait was by no means sad or dejected. The fact was that the victims had been given holy mushrooms to eat and *teometl* to drink and they were living their last hours under the sun in a state of almost unconscious exhilaration. There were about twenty of them. "There goes Magallanes, the Portuguese," said one of the Spanish camp. "And Avila, you see, two rows behind him?" And so one after the other, they were all spotted and recognised by their awe-stricken comrades in the palace. Esquivel was disappointed. He could not see Alonso amongst the victims. "I dare say he is now lying peacefully at the bottom of the lagoon!" he thought, and the idea increased his resentment against the *Manriques*, for he felt defrauded of his anticipated pleasure, since he had hoped to see him done to death under the square grin of *Witchilopochtli*.

The *tlapan wewetl* went on beating its lugubrious tones and the Spanish victims began to dance. Their bodies had been painted black and blue, crowned with paper-tiaras and armed with cardboard swords and bucklers. The Spaniards below, in the terraces, looked on with anguished hearts, and some of them were weeping. One by one the victims were seized while they danced, and laid on the sacred stone by four black-robed priests. Their comrades below could see heart after heart raised in the sky towards the grinning god. The bodies disappeared. They were not thrown down the steps of the *teocalli*. No one saw what happened to them.

All the victims had been sacrificed, the top-platform was empty again. The sun was sinking on the horizon and a gloomy silence pervaded the Spanish camp. All were thinking of the gruesome scene,

and memories of their fallen friends, yesterday's memories still fresh in their minds, arose to torture them while they went about dispirited, hardly daring to look each other in the eyes. Presently the horrified Spanish soldiers saw a strange procession come towards them. They stared at what they saw, incredulous yet overwhelmed by the immediate evidence of their senses. Their dead comrades, whom they had just seen sacrificed to Witchilopochtli, were advancing towards them in the grey dusk. They came in three rows of six, grinning horribly, staring with eyes empty yet filled with a curious, lurking glance in the pit of their black eye sockets, as if to reproach their comrades for their inactivity while they had fallen before the heathen god. Many soldiers fell on their knees, praying desperately, imploring the protection of Heaven from the wandering souls of their comrades no doubt rejected from Heaven and even by Purgatory back to our hellish earth since they had died without confession. The bolder ones ran to the edge of the trench to have a closer view of the weird sight. "There is Magallanes," whispered one. "I told you so." And another one murmured: "And Avila." "And old Bandada." "Yes. Both of them." "God have mercy on them . . . and on us." And they crossed themselves with compunction. The eighteen ghosts stood before them, silent, across the main causeway on the edge of the gap. Their chests showed the gory scars of the priestly stabs which had killed them. They were hirsute and bearded and their teeth shone dead-white above their fallen lower jaws which the weight of their long beards seemed to drag down.

Suddenly one of them, Magallanes the Portuguese, shouted at them: "Mauhqui!" The Spaniards were astounded. It was not Magallanes's voice. He spoke Nauatl. He called them cowards. "Maucatlacatl!" shouted another ghost. And soon the whole eighteen were hurling insults at the Spaniards in vehement Nauatl, while some of the old army soldiers who knew the ways of the Mexicans realised what had happened: the Mexicans had skinned the Spaniards and donned their victims' skins.

At this stage an Indian warrior ran from the city towards the row of ghosts. He was carrying something heavy in his hand which balanced itself pendulum-wise as he ran on. A few yards behind the gruesome rows of his sinister comrades, he hurled his burden in the air, over the heads of the eighteen ghosts and beyond the gap right into the Spanish quarters. The Spaniards saw the gory head of one of their comrades lying on the causeway. "San Juan!" shouted several voices. "Poor fellow! His wife was coming from Cuba. She will arrive too late!" Gallego had run out of a house close by and was leaning over the head. There was a paper tied to the dead man's hair. He tore it off and tried to read it. There was not enough light in the

street. He took the paper indoors. Alvarado, who had observed the whole scene, took the paper but found he could only understand the signature : Alonso Manrique. He fiddled with it, wondering what to do, till Long Face turned up. "It is written in Otomi, sir," he said. "And this is what it says : 'I shall be sacrificed in three days—Alonso Manrique.'"

7

When Alonso was brought to Cuauhtemoc's presence, the young emperor, who received him in his headquarters on top of a local teocalli, looked him up and down in silence for a while. "I am told that you speak our language," he said at last. "Yes, Great Lord," answered Alonso. "I am glad," said the emperor, "that enables me to say to you that I admire your courage and that I am proud of offering such a noble victim to my god."

The face of his beloved Xuchiŧl rose between Alonso's eyes and Cuauhtemoc's face which he had been seeing clearly till that second. But despite his deep emotion, Alonso did not budge. "You shall die this evening, during the day's ceremonies." A priest behind Alonso stepped forward. "Great Lord, that cannot be." His words were cut short by a violent noise. A cannon-ball had just landed on the steps of the temple and small pieces of granite from it were flying about. Unperturbed, Cuauhtemoc asked why. With firm deference, the priest answered, "I have consulted the stars. This prisoner is too important to die unnoticed by them, like the common soldiers. He is, moreover, golden-haired and blue-eyed. We must not offend Heaven. He must die under a rabbit-sign." Cuauhtemoc was contemptuous. Like many men of his age, he was somewhat impatient with the priestly superstitions. "Never mind." He raised his golden wand to signify that his decision was final, whatever the stars might say. A second cannon-ball landed on the teocalli closer still to him than the first. A piece of granite hit him in the hand and the golden wand fell on the ground. The priest picked it up and handed it to him with an impassive face.

Silence. Alonso is in prayer, thanking the Lord. The priest is in prayer, thanking Witchilopochtli. The sun looks on both and on the emperor, who asks, "When, then?"

"Three days hence," answered the priest.

8

The Serpent-Woman was standing behind priest and prisoner. Cuauhtemoc beckoned the priest to take the prisoner away. "What is it?" asked the young emperor. "My lord, despite their mishap, they are too strong. Our food is exhausted. We have no water. We cannot bury our dead and the houses and streets are full of bodies. Something must be done." The emperor knew it only too well. Yet what could he do? As a desperate solution it occurred to him to try to buy his peace with Alonso's life. He had Alonso brought back to his presence. "Manriqzin, write a letter to your chief. Say that if they . . . if you all go away in peace, I will recognise the King of Spain and I will give you your life. But you must all go away."

Alonso thought it over. He tried to remember whether there was any one in the Aztec camp who could read Spanish. No. There was no one. But a Spanish prisoner, not yet sacrificed, might know enough Aztec to betray him unwittingly. He had an idea. He took the paper and a brush of black colour given him by the emperor and wrote his message in Otomi. He knew Long Face could read it. Many Aztecs knew Otomi but they could not read.

9

After a long conversation with Alvarado, Long Face disappeared in a canoe towards midnight. He glided away at first towards Iztapalapa, then taking a wide sweep round positions which he knew to be dangerous, he drew close to the town and came upon the first row of Mexican sentinels who guarded it from the lagoon-side. Challenged, he explained that he had been stealing vegetables and hens from the Spaniards. He handed the sentinels a hen and some maize and passed on, till through a maze of small canals he penetrated into a dark, still water under a big house built on piles. He tied up his canoe, stood on it and knocked three times, then twice, then once, on a plank above his head. The plank was raised and a rope ladder was lowered. Long Face climbed into the house.

He was in a spacious kitchen big enough to feed several score of people. "What do you bring us to-night?" asked Shadow, his sister-in-law. She was still sad, as if the death of her little son, so many years past, had left a permanent trace on her soul. She had remained childless. "I bring you maize, three hens and some axis." Shadow's husband, Tsoyatl (or Palm) went down and brought the food in before it was stolen by some hungry wanderer. "I also want your help,"

Long Face said to Palm. "My master is in the wooden cage." Shadow was terror-stricken. "Poor Xuchitzin!" she cried out. "He will not be sacrificed till three days hence," added Long Face. She turned to her husband. "We must save him."

Palm kept silent, wondering how to achieve such an impossible feat. "Only warriors of the first rank have access to prisoners in the wooden cage," he pointed out. They were sitting on the mat, by the long hearth, silent, wondering. There was no light in the room. A faint light diffused by the stars sufficed to their still unspoiled eyes. Long Face asked: "What became of Omecatzin, the owner of this house?" Shadow and Palm were surprised at the question, which seemed to them somewhat irrelevant in the circumstances. "He was killed at the beginning of the siege," answered Palm. "I suppose all his property is in the house," Long Face went on. "It is very likely." There was again a long pause. "Suppose," Long Face began again, "we prowled about till we found it and I dressed myself as a first-class warrior and entered the wooden cage? . . ." The plan was bold. Palm rather liked it. Shadow was enthusiastic. They began their search at once, but they found nothing whatever, so that when at dawn the din of battle began again, it was decided to wait till the following night and to make the best use of the day to find a disguise for Long Face, who meanwhile remained hidden in the house.

10

Xuchitl had withstood the first hours of uncertainty with fortitude. But time went by and Alonso did not return. He could only be dead or in the hands of the Mexicans. Her heart began to fail her. She remained indoors, in the company of Citlali, but the lugubrious drone of the sacred drum penetrated right into her retreat and, as her imagination could follow the scene which the drum evoked, her agony knew no bounds. When Alonso's message reached the Spanish camp, Alvarado thought it best to inform her of it, for at any rate it meant that Alonso was not lying dead at the bottom of the lake, and moreover it gave the Spaniards three days to plan his rescue.

The effect of this revelation fully justified Alvarado's decision. Xuchitl recovered all her vigour and will-power. She reproached herself for her lack of faith and prayed to be forgiven and still to deserve to save Alonso for God's service. She talked to Long Face before the faithful oarsman had arranged all the details of his expedition with Alvarado, and insisted on being allowed, if necessary, to go herself under some disguise to the Mexican camp.


Both women were upset when that night Long Face did not return.

Every minute was golden during those three days and one whole day had gone by fruitless. If Long Face had been successful he would have returned. At best he had failed to liberate Alonso ; at worst he had been caught and, as a spy, would be cut into small pieces to be distributed as a warning throughout the villages of the valley which the besieged managed to reach now and then despite the Spanish blockade. When such thoughts as these, repressed by sheer will-power, came now and then to the surface of their minds, the two unfortunate women shivered with anguish. " Perhaps he is hiding in Shadow's house till he has found a way to get in touch with his lordship," said Citlali. And all that Xuchitl could answer was, " Perhaps."

They were fortunately distracted by an attack of Alvarado's troops, anxious to reach the great *teocalli* of Tlatelolco, close to the headquarters, before the company commanded by Cortés. It was a fight full of dramatic vicissitudes, during which the Spaniards had to withdraw more than once before the spirited defence of the heroic besieged—a haggard crowd of deep-eyed, hollow-cheeked, starved warriors. In the end, however, their spirit and persistence won, and the whole valley was able to see the bonfire which they lit on top of the *teocalli* to signify their victory. Xuchitl and Citlali saw it like the others and like the others fell on their knees in prayer. But their hearts were anxious, for Long Face had not returned. And this was the end of the second day.

II

Xuchitl lay that night on her couch, awake, facing the stark horror of her situation. She had made plan after plan, and discarded them all. Her eyes, wide-open, had remained nearly the whole night obstinately fixed on the eastern sky, which she could see through the window, watching the slow, slow motion of the far-off, serene stars. A streak of light on the edge of the horizon announced the dawn—and suddenly she sat up and saw the truth shining in her mind: " Strange ! I had not seen it before ! " She sprang to her feet, dressed, asked Citlali to call Gallego, who had become her faithful watch-dog and volunteer escort, and said to him : " Find me a horse and take me to see the general at once."



Long Face, Palm and Shadow had given up all hope of finding Omecatzin's clothes and jewels, and while Palm left to report for service, Shadow and Long Face remained in the house searching for other means to liberate Alonso. In the afternoon Palm turned up with a *petatl* matting or luggage-bag, neatly rolled up. He went indoors and opened it. It contained a complete outfit for a warrior of the highest class. "Ask no questions," he said mysteriously. Shadow soon transfigured Long Face into a military nobleman of the most exalted rank. When Long Face looked at himself in a polished stone-mirror, in one of the reception rooms of the house, he could not believe his eyes. Nevertheless he preferred to wait till nightfall before venturing out of doors, and when the three conspirators felt that it was dark enough to take the risk, the fake chief-warrior went out with as proud a mien as an oarsman could muster, playing with the golden wand which was one of the insignia of the military profession.

He found no difficulty with any of the sentinels he had to pass. They all bowed to him with a deference which gladdened his heart. The gates of the wooden cage were opened before him. It was his plan to express surprise at seeing Alonso there and to demand that he be taken to a safer place of confinement under his own custody. He walked in—there was a stir amongst the prisoners—and went straight to Alonso who was sitting outwardly calm on the wooden floor, leaning back on one of the beams of the prison. Alonso had meditated deeply and long on his situation. He had gone through a phase of absolute certainty: he would be saved, for the Lord would not waste all the effort of having prepared him for His service in that heathen land, only to throw him over when he might begin to be useful. Then at the end of a long night of mental prayer he saw how much pride, how much vanity in fact, lay hidden under such a certainty. How could he guess, define, prescribe the plans of the Lord? God was the only mind to know what was best. He would trust in God without implicitly assuming that he must be saved. Finally an impatience filled him at his own impotence. It is through men, and only through men, that God acts—and he was powerless. It was at this stage of his meditation, while he was in this state of mind, that a gorgeously dressed and beplumed warrior stood before him. "No sand and string here as when we first met," muttered the warrior between his teeth. Alonso stared at him, unable to believe his eyes. Had Long Face turned renegade and taken service under Cuauhtemoc? And even so, how could he, a humble oarsman—

Meanwhile, a man who had followed Long Face ever since he had entered the wooden cage, and stood in the dark, eyeing him curiously,

intently, stole away towards the gate and whispered to the sentinel : " Call your chief at once." The chief came close to the cage side. " Do you see that brilliant chief-warrior ? He is my slave. I bought him years ago ! " And he raised his handless wrist in the direction of Long Face, who was still talking in whispers with Alonso. " He is now a spy for the Whites."

Four hands seized hold of Long Face, despoiled him of his finery and tied him to a pole. " Throw him into the lake and fish him back so that he does not poison the fishes ! " growled the captain.

" Stay ! " ordered Alonso. " The emperor has promised to grant me everything I should ask till I am sacrificed. That man is mine."

The captain shrugged his shoulders. " Very well. We shall wait till to-morrow."

13

Cortés received Xuchitl with the peculiar grace he always reserved for women, warmed by an affectionate sympathy for Alonso's wife, which the circumstances made poignant. " Sir, did you *see* my husband's message ? " she asked. " No," he answered. " It was written in Otomi," she pointed out. Cortés looked at her, drew his fingers through his beard, to that scar under his lower lip which his beard hid, a gesture familiar with him when he was puzzled. She went on : " Alonso knows Nauatl. He deliberately chose Otomi, that is, he deliberately avoided both Nauatl and Castillian." Cortés asked : " Why was I not told before ? This is important. Why should such a message reach us in that language ? I myself had been trying to understand something else : why a message from Alonso should have come to us in the un-Christian way it did ? "

Xuchitl's eyes grew bright. " Exactly. Now, sir, I have an idea. That message was not from him but from Cuauhtemoc. He ordered Alonso to write it, and as the Mexicans cannot read and therefore could not tell the language in which the paper would be written, he wrote it in Otomi." " But why in Otomi ? " asked Cortés. " Because he did not want to send us the message which Cuauhtemoc desired him to write." Cortés remained silent for a while. " You must be right. It must have been a proposal of peace based on his deliverance in exchange for other conditions which he thought unacceptable to us. And all he sent us was the time-limit."

She stared at him in admiration. He had guessed the rest of her thought. " Let us negotiate at once as if we had received Cuauhtemoc's actual message. That may let us gain time and save him," he concluded.

Xuchitl rode back with a calmer heart. There was hope yet on the horizon. This was the morning of the third and last day.

14

The advance made on the previous day by both forces—Alvarado's and Cortés'—had enabled the Spaniards to gain access to the main square of Tlatelolco which they controlled by their hold over the teocalli, one of the four sides of it. Cortés rode right into the square. The frontage opposite the teocalli was still in the hands of the Mexicans and there was a barricade across the square. He rode to the edge of the barricade and spoke to the chiefs and warriors who stared at him with listless eyes. "I come to ask you to see reason. You are starving. Your women and children are starving. Tell Cuauhtemoc that I offer him peace. Let him come and talk to me. I ask one condition. He must bring my chief interpreter with him." The chiefs parleyed for a while and one of them left for the emperor's headquarters. He was a brave man. From the day on which Cuauhtemoc had sent his message through Alonso, the spirited Emperor of the Mexicans had veered round to an uncompromising attitude. He had suggested peace negotiations to a war-council only to find himself outvoted. Hurt in his pride, he had declared: "Henceforward any man who will talk to me of peace will be slain." The captain who had heard Cortés went nevertheless to report the interview. He held that to report an offer of peace was not to talk about making an offer of peace. Cuauhtemoc was not in a mood for such distinctions. He had his captain slain and his head thrown at Cortés feet as an answer. Cortés, incensed, decided to attack that very day.

This sealed the fate of Alonso and of Long Face, and when Xuchitl and Citlali heard of it, their despair knew no bounds. It was about midday on the third and last day.

15

The attack was launched two hours later. It was furious and stubborn on both sides and though it reduced the space left to the besieged, it was not final. At sunset the soldiery invaded the houses of the conquered zone in the hope of securing some valuable booty. A group of these eager soldiers had broken into the house in which Palm and Shadow had been living. They found it less rich than they had expected, and as in their thorough search they opened every cupboard and lifted every trap-door, they discovered the one in the kitchen-floor which opened on to the lake beneath. "Hallo!" said Esquivel, who was peeping into the water. "There is a woman in hiding here. She is mine!" He let himself down on to a narrow platform round one

of the piles which supported the house, and stepped into the canoe before Shadow, terrified, could move away. Short of gold, what better booty than a woman-slave? He did not wait for his comrades. He rowed away with his prey.

16

Meanwhile Xuchitl and Citlali were more anguished than ever, and every one in Alvarado's company had his eyes on the last teocalli which remained in the hands of the Mexicans, wondering whether they were going to witness the sacrifice of Alonso, one of the most universally liked men in the army. There was no sign of priests, of sacrifice, indeed, of life in the temple. Yet the sun went round on its course and fell towards the horizon and the end of the last day was at hand and there was no sign either of Alonso or of his faithful Long Face. As the two women were in prayer by the window over the lagoon, Citlali rose to her feet and cried out: "Xuchitzin, my sister!" Esquivel was passing under their window with his prey in his canoe. "Esquivel," cried Xuchitl through the window, "where did you find that woman?" Esquivel pretended not to hear. Shadow stood up in the canoe and cried: "Help! Help! Citlali, I must see you at once!" Citlali ran out of the house and came back with Gallego, to whom Xuchitl gave orders to take Esquivel's prisoner from him at whatever cost and at once.

Esquivel was no match for Gallego. "Here," Gallego shouted at him from the edge of the causeway. "Let go that Indian at once." "Mind your own business!" retorted Esquivel, who realised where the trouble came from. "That is exactly what I am doing. Stop at once or I will knock you into the water . . . And keep you down there too." Gallego leapt into a canoe, shoved off, gripped Esquivel firmly with his iron hand and beckoned Shadow to pass over to his own boat. Esquivel, sullen and passive, made no resistance.

When Shadow found herself in Xuchitl's room, she broke down and fell into a swoon. Citlali and Xuchitl were frightened. When she came to she cried, hardly able to speak. What could her tears betoken? Was she crying for her man or for theirs? Presently she calmed down and told her story. Alonso and Long Face were both prisoners. Palm had a plan to help them to escape and to escape with them into the Spanish camp. "He did not explain his plan to me, but when he left me he gave me instructions to hide under the house till sunset, to escape by the lagoon and ask you to see that there was a horse by the edge of the third canal beyond Tacuba close to the first bridge."

"When?" asked Citlali, almost breathless.

"At nightfall."

Palm was on duty at the wooden cage. He did not belong to that company but he had got himself transferred to it by bribing its officer with the most precious gift to be found in those days : a hen. Food and nothing but food was the secret of his plan. He had prepared a regular banquet with the hens and axi which Long Face had brought. He told the chief of the guard. He told his four comrades. He explained to them that he had eaten his fill at home and they were welcome to finish the hen-stew. There was pulque too. Plenty of it. But where ? That was the rub. Across the canal. The third house after the second bridge. "Rather far !" observed the chief of the guard. "If I had brought it here," explained Palm shrewdly, "you would have been too late and many others would have eaten it on the way. I had to hide it where I could." The chief of the guard was considering the matter, hesitating between hunger and duty. "I will be here all the time. You need fear nothing," said Palm. The temptation was too strong. The five men vanished out of sight.

Palm went into the wooden cage, seized hold of Tozan and tied him to a beam. He then went to Long Face and Alonso and whispered : "Not a moment to waste. Follow me and do as I do." They went out. He closed the door of the prison and left his war outfit leaning on it as if he had gone for a brief moment and was coming back presently. He then went round a narrow stone-edge to the back of the small island on which the prison stood and threw himself into the lake. Alonso and Long Face, both excellent swimmers, followed him. He led them to a tiny island opposite the prison on the edge of the town. There was a canoe hidden there. The three men took to the oars. In the distance, they could see the turmoil caused by their escape. Hundreds of warriors had seen them jump into the lake. Presently they saw two canoes in pursuit. They were swift—swifter than theirs. The distance between them was getting alarmingly smaller and the coast of Tacuba was still far away. Anxiety began to creep into their hearts. Suddenly, to their astonishment, they saw the two canoes turn sharply and retrace their course. What had happened ? Alonso looked backwards. There was a brigantine behind them.

They were taken on board. "Sir Don Alonso Manrique," smiled the captain, "the Lord has shown you His favour." Alonso was happy thinking of Xuchitl and happier still that his faithful Long Face had been saved with him. Yet something in him prevented him from entering into the spirit of the captain's greetings. "Let Him grant me it may be for His service !" he answered simply. Palm explained his scheme and Alonso begged the captain to have them conveyed to the

spot near Tacuba where a horse was to be waiting for him. When they reached that spot it was dark. A white horse could be guessed in the darkness. Alonso divined that the small human shape anxiously waiting by the parapet of the bridge was Xuchitl.

18

They decided to send Gallego back with the horse and to return in the brigantine. The night was cool and quiet and their hearts were appeased—but for the misery they knew the besieged were undergoing. When they happened to be on the wind-side of the city, the stench that came from the unfortunate Tenochtitlán, strewn with unburied corpses, was appalling. "When will it end?" asked Xuchitl. And Alonso answered, "Quite soon. They are exhausted." The captain noticed a curiously ornamented canoe which was being pushed hurriedly under a big house, towards one of the many covered mooring-spaces of the city. He wondered whether it might not be prepared for Cuauhtemoc's flight. For a moment he hesitated whether to go on his way or to stay and keep watch on the movements of that suspect canoe. He decided to proceed and return when he had landed his guests.

When Alonso and Xuchitl landed, the news of Alonso's homecoming had already been brought to the camp by Gallego. Alvarado and several other captains and soldiers were waiting for them and received them with the utmost joy. Cortés arrived later and took part in the general rejoicing. As the whole company were seeing the general back to the spot where his horse awaited him, they heard a heated discussion in the soldiers' quarters. Two men were coming out ready for a fight. They were taken aback on seeing Cortés. "What is the matter?" asked the general. Gallego, one of the would-be fighters, explained: "Esquivel complains that I took an Indian woman from him. I did nothing but obey orders." Esquivel was furious. "Whose orders?" he shouted. "A woman gives no orders!" Cortés smiled, amused at Esquivel's remark. "It depends on the woman," he pointed out, and he asked; "What woman was it?" Alonso answered the question, "Xuchitl, sir. She gave the orders. As for the woman Esquivel was taking away, she is the wife of the man who saved my life and my servant's as well."

Cortés turned to Esquivel: "I am sorry for you. I hope you will be luckier the next time. But one word to you both: fight if you wish. But it must be to the death. And I will hang the winner."

19

The final assault took place the next day. The spirit of the defenders was unbroken but their bodies gave way. They were walking spectres. Most of them had taken no food for days. They were living in a tiny portion of the city which once was theirs, heaped together in the midst of their dead. Every night people took desperately to the water in canoes, swimming, trying to evade their miserable destiny. After a short sharp fight, begun towards the middle of the afternoon, the Spaniards seized hold of the last *teocalli*—that in which Cuauhtemoc had established his headquarters. There was no trace of the emperor.

The captain who had found Alonso the night before had kept a careful watch over the rich canoe which he had seen while conveying Alonso and Xuchitl back to Alvarado's quarters. He was rewarded for his patience and vigilance. The canoe emerged out of its hiding-place towards sunset. He was going to let off one of his guns, when a warrior on board beckoned to him not to shoot, pointing at a young man who sat abaft, with his face hidden in his hands. "Cuauhtemoc!" cried out the captain.

Half an hour later Cuauhtemoc landed from the brigantine at the foot of Cortés' headquarters in the town. The victor received him with courtesy, but Cuauhtemoc was then living beyond courtesy. He seized a dagger which Cortés was wearing at his waist and passionately cried: "Have done with me!" Cortés turned to Alonso and quietly said: "Tell him God forbid I should take the life of such a brave man!"

Silence fell over the lagoon.

PART XVI

XUCHITL DISCOVERS THE OLD WORLD

I

AS SOON as he heard that a ship was available, Alonso left for Veracruz with Xuchitl. He had given Antonio instructions with regard to his interests in Tetzcuco. Citlali and Long Face were to remain in charge of his household and Antonio would watch over the fulfilment of the promise, spontaneously made by Cortés, to hand over to Xuchitl the property of the Crown of Tetzcuco.

Xuchitl went towards Veracruz, and towards the Old World beyond, which for her was new, with a heart eager for experience and discovery. She was no longer as naïve as she had been about the Whites. She no longer saw in them men of an altogether different nature she had first thought them to be, and though she still admired the sense of fairness and human love which animated Alonso, she realised that the difference between Europeans and Mexicans was perhaps a mere matter of more or less.

The ship filled her with admiration and though it would have seemed to us a nutshell by the side of our floating palaces, it seemed to her a floating palace by the side of her father's canoes. As the coast receded in the horizon a strong emotion welled up in her heart. "What will life be like when I return?" she thought, and then again, "Shall I ever return?"

Alonso was leaning over the window of his cabin, beside her. He guessed her state of mind. He himself was thinking of that day, eight years earlier, when he had been watching the coast of his native Spain as it melted into the grey horizon, and he remembered how he had then said to himself:

"Beware of love for it is a wide, wide sea! . . ."

A prophetic vision of this return with his love across the wide, wide sea, back to Spain, to a Spain in which his other love, his mother, had perhaps by now fallen a victim of meanness and hatred. He drew Xuchitl to him and whispered: "I am with you."

2

The crossing was perfect and the sea was very well-behaved. But as they were already within sight of the Spanish coast, a strong northern wind forced them to humour the weather, which carried them much farther south than they wished. At dusk the skipper, though unable to see the stars, reckoned that they were opposite the Moroccan coast. Suddenly they heard a shot, in fact, a double shot, and the mast was broken. Out of the darker part of the horizon, a ship came into sight. The skipper grew pale. He had recognised a Moroccan pirate ship. There was no possible escape. The men swore and the women prayed. The Moroccans were the cruellest pirates in those days. Every one on board trembled for his life and gladly gave up his wealth for lost if to buy off Fate and save his own skin and the honour of his women-folk.

The captain asked Alonso's opinion. "Let us fight," answered Alonso. "We shall not be any the worse if we lose the battle and we shall have saved our honour." The captain decided to follow this advice and had his guns pointed at the pirate ship. They were but two small guns and he could see that the enemy was much stronger in artillery. The Moroccans, who were not expecting a reply from such a small ship, were taken aback. They were in fact sailing towards their victim, and though their captain had been anxious to capture her unharmed, he let go his fury by firing his forward gun which, however, missed so that the round stone ball fell within a few yards, raising spouts of green water which flooded the Christian deck. A second ball was more deadly. It burst the side of the caravel. Water began to pour in. Some of the passengers took to the boats. The Moroccans, who saw their booty in danger, rushed alongside and leapt over to the caravel to try to save her. The first men who leapt on board were slain by the Spaniards. In their anxiety to save the goods—and in particular the gold which every Spanish caravel was already supposed to convey—the Moroccans did not press their assault as hard as their temper and bravery prompted; yet numbers told in the end and the Spaniards were overpowered. A number of Moroccan sailors endeavoured to close the gap on the side of the caravel and to pump out the water; but on their advice, the ship was emptied of its most valuable contents and, this done was allowed to sink with the older passengers and all those who seemed to the pirates too poor to yield a ransom.

Alonso found himself in chains at the bottom of the pirate ship, with many other passengers. Xuchitl found herself in a group of weeping and terror-stricken women, all herded together in a dark, closed room. Fortunately the crossing was not long, and after a few hours tossed by an unruly sea, with another sea of dark thoughts rolling

in their inner world, the unhappy prisoners were shepherded out of their floating jails on to the quayside of a gay, populous and ill-smelling port.

3

They were in Rabat. The captain of the pirate ship had soon realised that Alonso and his wife were the most important people on board, those whose ransom would be most valuable. He gave orders to have Alonso conveyed to the general prison for captives, where he would be safely stowed till the money to pay for him arrived from Spain. As to Xuchitl, the usual course for a young woman who fell into the hands of a Moorish pirate was to join his harem, unless she were given as a present to some powerful official or to the Sultan. The captain had never seen a woman just like Xuchitl in his life. He was not interested in her. He decided to take her home to show her to his other wives while he thought it over. One could never tell. She might become desirable some day.

He took her by the hand and guided her across a labyrinth of narrow lanes, under mysterious bridges, between high, white, blind walls, towards the house he had built for himself on a cliff between the sea and the green and yellow plain. They entered the house. Xuchitl was in a dejected state. Nothing had ever been further from her thoughts, from the wildest flights of her imagination, than what she then saw and experienced. The people in whose midst she had fallen seemed to be yet a third kind of men—neither her own nor Alonso's. The house, withal, appealed to her. It was cool, clean, pleasant, aromatic, and bathed in a subdued light, a kind of permanent dusk. Silence. Soft steps about.

A woman with heavy black eyebrows, big black eyes and an overflowing body emerged from the darkness. "Is this your last acquisition?" she asked. She was the pirate's legitimate wife, retired as such, now useful mostly as the general housekeeper and manager of his harem. She smiled at the newcomer, showing a row of very white teeth. "Does she speak any Arabic?" They both glanced at her and were satisfied that she did not. "I do not think much of her looks. Where does she come from?" While she spoke she pawed Xuchitl all over with a complete disregard for her feelings, as if the captive were a mare or a dog. "What is this?" she asked and she pulled at a chain which Xuchitl was wearing round her neck. "Ah, the Christian Mary. She is a Christian." Then she asked again, "And this?" She pulled at another chain. The Heart of Jade appeared. He saw it and took it in his hand. "I have never seen this stone before," he said, and to Xuchitl's dismay, he put it round his neck.

4

Night fell and Alonso, lying on the bare tiled floor of a terrace in the fortress where he was a prisoner, unable to settle down, with a heavy chain attached to his ankles, was tossed this way and that as if the swinging movement of the sea which for so many weeks had worked itself into his body, had passed now into his mind. The thought of Xuchitl made him suffer agony. What was happening to her in the midst of the most lecherous race on earth? Then, his mother. Was it for this that, very much against the grain, he had remained in Mexico to serve the Lord till the end? Had he done wrong? Should he have left for Spain, to the help of his mother, as soon as he had received the first news of her danger? How difficult it was for men to interpret the Lord! The air was soft, the sky a deep velvety dark blue, the stars shone like diamonds—she had the Heart of Jade round her neck, as well as his mother's silver medal. Suppose a Moor were to steal her Heart of Jade and— He shuddered to think of what the results might be. Should he keep that dangerous jewel? He had thought more than once of destroying it. But was it safe? He must do something about it, particularly now, when the Esquivels were beginning to chatter about its magical powers and the Inquisition might be disquieted and prosecute him for it. But he must be careful. He must not hand over a weapon to those who said it was magic and heathenish by getting rid of it now that it was under suspicion. He must face the issue squarely. That was the only thing to do. Meanwhile, he went on thinking, God knew what had become of it and of his beloved Xuchitl. He raised his heart to Heaven and prayed mentally for her safety, for she was precious to him. But how was it possible that they should be saved? Even in the luckiest of circumstances, how long would he need to put together the money which was sure to be exacted for his ransom. And meanwhile, would not Xuchitl . . . be lost?

A voice spoke in the night. "Alonso Manrique!" He sprang to his feet. "Come with me," ordered the voice in Spanish.

5

Fatima took Xuchitl away without much ceremony. She realised that the new, strange-looking woman had not caught the attention of the master, and that circumstance was enough to destroy the prestige of the new-comer in her eyes. Xuchitl crossed a few dark, cosy, well-appointed rooms, and finally found herself standing, somewhat confused, at the entrance of a bigger hall, in which about a dozen women

were chatting, some sewing, one threading yellowish beads on to a string that looked like silver. There were big cushions all over and a vihuela lay in a corner reflecting on its shiny back the light of a lustre in which a dozen candles were burning.

"Here is a new sister," said Fatima in Arabic. There was a flutter in the harem and the younger and more agile of the women came forward to have a close look at the newcomer. Xuchitl let herself be inspected in a dazed state. Deep down, under her shame and confusion, an anguish was gnawing at her vitals—what was happening . . . what had happened to Alonso? Meanwhile, in another world, far, far away, there under her eyes, three or four pretty faces, over-scented and over-painted, with big eyes, black, very black and shining, save one whose eyes were blue—like his, oh! where is he now?—were looking at her and with their hands on her arms and shoulders were acquainting themselves with her body and now and then asking her questions which she could not understand.

There was a woman with sad eyes and a pale-golden face, sitting in silence, sewing, a few feet away. "I know where she comes from . . ." she said. "I have seen that type in Seville, years ago. She is not an Indian from the East, but an Indian from the West. She may know my language." And then, she asked Xuchitl in Spanish: "What is your name?" This plain question brought Xuchitl down to her immediate reality. "Oh, dear lady," she cried out, and she moved towards her. But she had nothing special to ask. She just felt in need of help and companionship. "What is going to happen to me?" she asked. There were two more Spaniards present; three in all, as different as they could be. The one who had spoken was Doña Laura de Aguilar, a noble woman of Seville. Muley, the pirate, when he had caught her, had fallen in love with her, for she was very beautiful, and he had refused to have her bought back by her family. When in later years, he tired of her and was willing to let her go, her family had forgotten all about her. She was doomed to live and die in that God-forsaken harem. The other two were younger and more light-hearted. Amalia Rodriguez was happy. She was the favourite for the time being. She was ambitious and full of hope to become a power in the land. Violante Xerez was a little prostitute whom Muley had picked up on board a Spanish galleon and whom he liked enough to keep her for himself. She liked the harem better than a brothel and left it at that.

When Xuchitl asked her anxious question, Doña Laura was moved, cast her beautiful eyes on the unfortunate Indian girl and said nothing; but the two younger girls laughed. "Well, this is not a convent for nuns!" said Amalia and Violante grinned at the joke. Doña Laura said to Fatima in Arabic: "Take her away to a quiet room and let

her suffer for a while in peace." Fatima disliked all advice given with authority and just laughed, standing callously by, while Xuchitl was still on her feet, trembling inwardly with a number of torturing emotions. A small, Moorish young woman, who had not moved yet and from the couch of cushions on which she was lying, had watched the whole scene with disapproving eyes, sprang to her feet and went past Fatima—whom she hated and despised—straight to Xuchitl. She put her arms round her neck, kissed her and took her away, across the room, to her own private quarters.

She made her lie down on a comfortable couch and let her weep in peace. She had a little kitchen by her bedroom. She threw a few sticks of charcoal into the tiny fireplace and blew up a flame in a few minutes with a round esparto fan. She put an earthenware pot of water upon it and made some mint-tea. Then she went back to the big room, beckoned to Doña Laura to come, for she herself could not speak Spanish, gave them both the mint-tea she had prepared and left them there together.

Xuchitl was moved to tears and much refreshed by them. She opened her heart to Doña Laura and imparted her fears for Alonso and for her own self. "May the Lord protect you," said Doña Laura. She would go no further. She knew the Lord did not always protect His faithful from the infidels. The two powerless women remained together for hours. Doña Laura offered Xuchitl food but Xuchitl refused to take any. She was exhausted, too exhausted either to eat or to sleep.

Suddenly Fatima turned up, pale and flustered. "If only people would not interfere with my business," she cried out peevishly, and added turning to Doña Laura: "Quick. Explain to her that she must come and be bathed at once. The Master wants her this very minute. He is in a terrible passion about it and here I am, not ready. He was quite indifferent when he brought her, but something must have happened while he slept. I should not wonder if it was that devilish stone of hers which he put round his neck. Quick. Quick."

Xuchitl listened to the strange language, saw the gestures and read the faces and she trembled in her very bones.

6

Towards midnight the Governor of Rabat arrived from Fez. He threw the reins of his black horse to his escort and entered his headquarters. He sat on a low heap of cushions in a corner of the arcade in the chief patio of his house and summoned his secretary. "What news?"

"Muley has caught a Spanish ship coming from the Indies. He had to sink her."

"Much booty?"

"Most of it went down. He brought some home, though probably more than he says."

"Any slaves for ransom?"

"Here is the list." The secretary handed him a paper. The governor glanced at it with a distracted eye. He suddenly shook the paper, drew it closer to the light and read again. "Bring that other light over here," he ordered. He read again more carefully. "What is this name here?" he asked his secretary. "Alonso Manrique, sir, a gentleman coming from the Indies back to his native city of Torremala." "Have him brought to me at once."

Presently Alonso, still laden with chains, entered the patio where the Governor of Rabat awaited him. "Sir Don Alonso Manrique," said the governor in Spanish and then he went on in Arabic: "I owe you a horse. It is at your disposal. And a ship as well." Alonso, who had recognised the voice, fell on his knees. "The Lord of us all be praised, Hussein. Save the life and the honour of my wife!"

A few minutes later—the matter did not require many explanations for Hussein—the governor and Alonso were hurrying through the dark streets of Rabat followed by an escort of ten armed men.

7

Muley was furious and roared in his bedroom like a hungry lion in his cage. "Fatima! Fatima!" He was lying on his bed nervously fingering the Heart of Jade. He had wakened up from the slumber into which his good dinner had plunged him in a state of mad desire for the strange woman he had made his slave, and in spite of his repeated, pressing orders to Fatima, the woman was not brought to him. Fatima meanwhile was having Xuchitl bathed and perfumed with the scent which Muley preferred. There was a tension everywhere in the house and servants ran this way and that, bringing hot water, towels, silk gowns . . . while every now and then the impatient man roared again: "Fatima!"

The street-door resounded with three knocks which reverberated through the whole house. An unheard of occurrence at such an hour. Muley sprang out of bed, threw a burnous over his shoulders and seized a dagger. "Who can be the son of a camel! . . ." He went on muttering while he rushed to the door. "Who is there?" he shouted in an angry voice. "Muley, open at once!" He recognised the voice and became a lamb.

"What is the matter?" he asked, rather upset; and with a hospitable gesture he took the strangers indoors, adding: "Come in. What is the matter? Why so late?" He had recognised his man-slave Alonso Manrique behind the governor. "Muley," said the governor, "Don Alonso Manrique is my friend. You have his wife here. I want to see her."

Muley knew how close to one hundred lashes with an iron-weighted leather strap were Hussein's courtesies. That made him wondrously courteous himself. He smiled at Alonso Manrique as if the Spaniard were his dearest friend. The scene had of course completely cooled his amorous ardours. He suddenly remembered the Heart of Jade. "By the way, I rescued this stone for you, lest my lady your wife had it stolen from her," he said to Alonso obsequiously. When he saw that Muley was wearing the Heart of Jade on his chest, Alonso grew pale. He had to summon all his energy to remain outwardly serene. He would have given the rest of his life to see Xuchitl there safe and sound and happy. His hands itched to seize Muley's neck and twist it savagely. Muley had left the room.

Fatima meanwhile, unaware of this unexpected complication, had at last completed Xuchitl's toilette and was bringing her to Muley's bedroom dressed in a silk night-gown and heavily scented. Xuchitl was weeping and long threads of tears ran down her cheeks and fell on her bare breast, for the night-dress was generously open in front and was moreover too big for her. When Muley saw her, he hesitated. Should he make Hussein wait or should he bring Xuchitl to her husband in that revealing state?

Alonso was unable to resist the impulse which forced him to rush ahead. Xuchitl was there, in the direction in which Muley had disappeared. He followed Muley's steps boldly. Hussein tried to hold him back but it all happened too quickly and was over before any one could realise how it had happened. There was a corridor starting from the room where Alonso had been waiting with Hussein. At one end of it Muley had met Xuchitl with Fatima, and was hesitating. At the other, Alonso had just come out of the room, rushing towards her. There was a light in the centre, hanging from the ceiling. "Alonso!" she cried, and passing swiftly by Muley's side, she ran to his arms.

"Has this dog——!" he asked in Nauatl. She did not say a word but kissed him with a joy so free that it made him happy. Then in Nauatl she said: "Ask for my clothes back." Fatima had already gone to fetch them. Muley had rejoined Hussein in the outer room. While she dressed again, Xuchitl saw the Heart of Jade on Alonso's chest. They could hardly believe that so much agony could be so quickly and so providentially relieved. "How little faith we have had," she said. And he felt it as a reproach which he fully deserved.

"Marien will not believe her eyes when she sees you," said Hussein as he opened the door of his private apartments. He sent her a message by his negro boy. Alonso had sat down in a dark corner. He recognised her at once and found she had aged less than he had feared. She knew nothing about the events of the night. From his dark corner Alonso said in Spanish: "Good-evening, Leonor." It was as if a ghost had suddenly risen from the past in the middle of the room. "Alonso!" They took each other's hands. "Oh how much you have changed!" she said. And he: "This is my wife." Leonor embraced and kissed Xuchitl.

Alonso and Xuchitl stayed in that hospitable house until the arrangements had been made for them to cross over to Spain. Hussein provided for everything. He insisted in presenting Alonso with a fine horse, and his insistence made Alonso smile, thinking of that day by the river when old Suárez had humiliated the young and fiery Moor with his contemptuous reference to the hired hack he was riding in contrast with the fine horse Leonor was taking away. "Hussein's memory is as relentless as his pride and as his gratitude," he thought. Who would have guessed that he, Alonso, would see Leonor again after that day when, upon his return from the riverside, where he had left her with Hussein, he had found his room full of jessamine? And now, when he was taking a second farewell of her, who could say that they were never to meet again?

The power of Morocco was then at its lowest, and Hussein had to give strict instructions to the skipper of his sailing ship to sail by night, to seek shelter only in solitary coves, for practically every African port save Rabat was then either in Castilian or in Portuguese hands, and to leave Alonso and Xuchitl by night at a particular spot on the mouth of the River Guadiana which the skipper knew well and Hussein also.

The skipper was an expert pilot both of the African and of the European coasts of the Straits. He navigated skilfully and during the third night of their adventurous yet uneventful voyage, he was able to land Alonso and Xuchitl and their horse on a deserted sandy shore on the Guadiana River. Before parting, the skipper gave Alonso a sword, a basket of food and a purse of gold. "These are my orders," he said. Alonso would have refused the gold in his earlier days. He had grown wiser and took it all. "May Allah protect you!" he said.

The small caravel sailed away. Alonso and Xuchitl were left alone in the dark with their precious Arab horse. Alonso fell on his knees. What a strange return to his native land! The waters of the Guadiana flowed with a fresh, warbling murmur in the dark night. Otherwise

silence. She had knelt by his side and they remained thus absorbed in prayer, close to one another, yet without touching each other, feeling the inner river of their emotions flowing obscurely towards unknown destinies, through possibly coming storms. A bell from a distant convent brought to their ears a string of frail metallic notes wafted softly by the still air of the night. "I am here, not very far from you," it seemed to say. "Here, at the foot of the tower from which I call you to commune with me, other souls are being summoned to prayer. You will all meet on your way to the Lord." The frail, clear notes of the bell fell on their souls like a dew of sound. The first streaks of light were beginning to illuminate the dark skies. What had the new life in store for them, the new life which on that day was dawning?

9

They spent the next night on their way to Torremala in a roadside-inn, fortunately too much used to traffic to and from Palos—which meant to and from the Indies—for Xuchitl's looks to attract much attention. Alonso was anxious to pass unnoticed until he had found out how the land lay in Torremala. By sunset the next day, with Xuchitl riding pillion, he climbed the last hill, from the top of which he knew he would see the familiar landscape. His heart was beating fast. He was remembering how indifferent he had been when, accompanied by his father and Suárez, he had left Torremala for Palos and the Indies. Now, a conquered conqueror, with his precious booty by him, he returned home. Home! Was it a home? A stranger was occupying his father's house, usurping his rights, while his mother had had to take refuge in the old Jewry and was under the threat of the most dangerous accusation that could be levelled against any one in Spain. Even he, as soon as he appeared . . .

Suddenly he pulled up : under the setting sun the glorious sight of his native valley unfolded itself before his eyes. The first thing he saw was the manor. "See, Xuchitl, our house!" She was not impressed, born and bred as she was in the extravagantly splendid royal palace of Nezawal Pilli; but she was moved (so, that is where he was born!) when she noticed the commanding site, the gardens, the grounds and the fields which—one could see at a glance—made one with it. Meanwhile, Alonso's eyes swept the whole landscape, the monastery on the other hill, the river flowing between the two heights, the main avenue where the Esquivels used to live, and the river-pool where he used to bathe with Antonio. The dramatic events which had led to his first departure for his short-lived adventure in Toledo came back vividly to his memory. They had both alighted and were sitting on the sandy ground in the midst of wiry, sturdy plants of lavender and thyme.

Xuchitl was thinking of her own native land. She found a surprising likeness between her adopted and her native country—a curious feeling of pristine vigour. “How beautiful it is!” she said and she drew close to him. They remained there till night fell. Alonso had made up his mind to arrive when everybody would be at home and most people asleep. It was indispensable that he should be discreet. Masculine valour and daring were of no avail against the Inquisition. Skill, coolness, patience were the required qualities.

He knew every step of the way. He was glad the night was dark. There was no moon, but the stars shone with a beauty which struck Xuchitl and made her think of her father. Thus Nezawal Pilli, King of Tetzcuco, was riding through the streets of Torremala, an old Andalusian town, on an Arab horse, in his daughter’s imagination, and the hooves of the horse which carried him in spirit resounded in the empty streets of the sleepy little town till they suddenly halted at the door in which another ancestor of the grandson-to-come had once lived. Alonso knocked at the door of Samuel ha-Levy’s house.

10

While he waited, his heart went out to his mother who there, behind that closed, barred door of dark oak studded with big iron nails, was expecting him as she had done daily for years. A manly, military step was heard, then a voice: “Who is there?” Alonso recognised the voice at once. “Open to me, Suárez!” No one in the world but Alonso could talk like that to the old steward. “Blessed be the Lord!” he cried out, and he pulled the bolts aside.

The men opened their arms. “Blessed be the Lord!” repeated Suárez with a voice broken by emotion, perhaps a little more emotion than Alonso had expected. “My lady!” he added, and he kissed Xuchitl’s hand. “Henry!” he called. A young man came out. “See to my Lord Don Alonso’s horse. Casilda! Catalina!” His wife and daughter appeared in the entrance hall, a square, stone-walled room between the street door and the main patio. “My Lord Don Alonso and our lady his wife. Quickly. Prepare their rooms.”

They all went indoors. There was no light for fear of the mosquitoes; only a faint, pale-yellow ray coming from an oil-lamp in the kitchen. “But,” said Alonso with a heart which was beginning to be overcast with the blackest clouds, “Suárez, where is my mother?” Suárez cast his earnest, careworn eyes on Alonso: “My lady . . . is away. She is in Seville. . . .”

Casilda, with a genuine commiseration in her eyes and in the stern folds of her mouth, broke in: “There are too many black-hearted

villains about, sir !” And Catalina, the young daughter, added : “ I pray every night for my lady Doña Isabel. May God give her strength in her trials !” Alonso was bewildered. He had not sat down yet and stood there holding Xuchitl’s hand and listening to the stunning news, hardly able to take it in. Suárez was now speaking. “ We do not know for certain who denounced her to the Holy Office. One never does. But we have a shrewd guess. The Inquisition-men came to fetch her six months ago. . . . Six months and three weeks to-morrow. . . . She received the blow like a saint. . . .”

“ They took everything she owned,” said Casilda. “ Above all her books. You should have seen the face of the official who came when he saw her books, you know the ones I mean, in odd characters. . . . He said they were all bad books of Mahomet . . . and even worse, though I cannot see how anything can be worse than Mahomet !” Alonso smiled above and outside his grief. He led Xuchitl to a chair and fell on another chair himself exhausted with mental fatigue. “ But . . . the Prior ?” he asked. Suárez shook his head. “ The Prior . . . the Lord had taken him away before my lady was imprisoned.” Alonso was overwhelmed. “ Father Guzmán dead !” He had counted on the good Prior’s help to guide him in his tribulations. So the Lord meant him to struggle unaided. Xuchitl saw him suffer. She took his hand in hers.

“ Sir,” said Suárez. The long absence and Alonso’s manly body and voice made it easier to address as “ Sir ” the man he had known as a boy. “ Sir, it is not for me to tender any advice. But I say : courage and at them. They are a pack of dogs hiding behind the Holy Office. But the Holy Office is honest and God-fearing and truth must win.” Then, with a voice in which Alonso perceived a secret intention, the old steward added : “ My lady looks tired. I believe my two women should take her to bed without more delay.”

II

When they were alone, Suárez spoke more openly. “ The whole thing has been contrived by old Esquivel and by his daughter. They have attacked your mother but they really aim at you. Be on your guard. Your cousin over there, who is now living in our house and eating our bread is helping them, of course. He knows that if you are cleared, out he goes. I was able to save most of your furniture and of your mother’s, which you will see here. I also saved and hid one of the two sticks . . . you remember . . . with golden tops. I could not find the other one, the one which had your initials. . . .”

“ What do you live on ?” asked Alonso.

"On the mercy of God," answered Suárez with a dry humour which Alonso appreciated despite the grimness of their situation. "Your mother had saved a little heap . . . which was taken away by the 'Familiars' of the Inquisition. Fortunately I had also saved a little heap, much smaller, of course. We live on that."

Alonso said: "Bring me that stick." Suárez disappeared and returned presently with Don Rodrigo's stick in his hand. Alonso had an idea. He did not try to break the stick. As he had guessed, he was able to unscrew the golden top. "Here. Keep it by, and if necessary bury it in the garden. And when you are short of funds, unscrew the top, like this, and take out a golden coin . . . like this!" And he gave the astonished steward a golden "Enrique," which shone even in the dim light in which they sat, like a star in a moonless night.

When Suárez recovered from his astonishment, he went on unburdening his bosom. "Burying it in the garden . . . the idea does not make me happy. . . . It was not very wise of my lady to keep those books about, and in particular the books in Hebrew. She was too much of a saint to realise that other people would not look at it as she did. And let me tell you, sir, the fact that Your Mercy knows Hebrew will not help us very much in the struggle. Then, there are . . . other things."

"You must tell me all. But why did you say that the idea of burying the stick in the garden did not make you happy?"

"It is all one and the same," answered Suárez, and he cast a disquieted, furtive glance towards the patio. He kept silence for a while, then drawing closer to Alonso and in a lower voice: "The two women do not know it yet and I would ask Your Mercy not to repeat it: the garden is haunted!"

"The garden is . . . Come, come!"

"I know you were always inclined to take these things airily," retorted Suárez with a tone of slight reproach. "But there is no question about it, and you shall not have long to wait. What time do you make it? I should say . . . But why cast about for guesses? Let us go out and see."

The two men went out into the patio. It was a quadrangle of roses and carnations and wallflowers among which towered a sad, but firm and erect, solitary cypress. A geometric design of myrtle imparted to it a noble, abstract character as well as an acrid aroma. Three sides were enclosed by the house. The fourth was open towards a terrace from which the garden gradually descended in a gentle slope towards the river. Suárez looked at the stars. "Not long to wait till midnight. He is always about between midnight and one."

"Who is 'he'?" asked Alonso.

"The ghost. He comes every night."

They were silent. Suárez had spoken in such a matter-of-fact

manner that Alonso, without realising it, had entered into the situation. "How long has he been coming?" he asked. "For about six weeks or so. Of course, he may have been coming before. But we have not noticed him till then," answered Suárez. "How 'we'?" asked Alonso. "I mean my son and I. We have kept the fact from the two women. I saw him first, one day . . . I remember it was the day when . . ." He stopped short, put his finger over his lips and beckoned rather than said: "There he is!"

Alonso looked in the direction in which Suárez had pointed, but saw nothing. They waited in silence. The path wound down the garden to a hedge of box-wood which separated it from the orchard beyond. Suddenly, in the opening framed with the leaves of laurels and rose-bushes which made a kind of gate between the two, Alonso saw a shadow which stood for an instant, hardly less dark—unless it was just a little darker—than the rest of the night, then vanished. Alonso went forward resolutely towards it. He passed the spot where it had stood and stalked this way and that in the orchard in search of it. There was no trace of it anywhere.

He went to bed and despite his grief over his mother and his excitement over the ghost, he slept soundly.

12

A few weeks before Alonso had been smuggled into his native land under the protection of the night, Vicente Esquivel landed triumphantly in Sanlúcar. He had succeeded in bagging enough gold to make himself independent, at any rate for some time to come. As soon as he found himself on the quay he went to the best inn he could find, inquired for a page, went back to the ship, had his baggage unloaded and deposited in his room at the inn and asked his page where he could buy a horse. The page, a boy of fourteen, who looked seventeen and had the wits of thirty, led him to a friend who had never had a horse in his life but who could always procure himself one if the transaction were worth the trouble. This handy friend was a farrier, young, gay and quick-witted. "Rafael," said the page, "this gentleman just landed from the Indies is out to buy a horse." Rafael took the hint at once. "If the gentleman would do me the honour of waiting, I will show him the best horse in Sanlúcar."

That very day Esquivel left for Seville riding an indifferent mare for which he had paid twice as much as she was worth. He was pleased with himself. He would show his ever needy father how a man makes a fortune in this world and prove to his sister that there are honourable ways of living; best of all he would show Alonso Manrique who was

the stronger of the two. His heart beat faster as he rode into Seville. He had never seen such a large town ; for Seville was then the largest town in Spain, larger than Tenochtitlán, he thought, and ever so much finer. He inquired several times for a particular spot in the city. Seville was then, as now, a labyrinth of narrow, winding streets. He began to suspect that one or two of the answers which had been given to his inquiries had been hoaxes; as indeed was the case, and wasted still more time coming and going so that when at last he saw the tower of the church behind which he knew the house of his father and sister stood, he had lost a good deal of his self-satisfaction and serenity. "Hum . . . not too bad !" he said, and he alighted.

13

There was the usual armour-shop, but it seemed to him not very well stocked, and as it were somewhat idle. The door was open, but a long curtain protected the shop from the heat and from flies. He drew it aside and entered the cool, dark cavity, where a few suits of armour and swords managed to pick up the little light allowed in. An apprentice was rubbing a rusty old spear with sand. "Ave Maria," said Esquivel. "Without sin conceived," answered the youngster. "Where is the armour-master?" asked the newcomer. "I don't know." Esquivel grinned. "Well done, youngster. Go and fetch him straightway and I will give you a silver coin, never mind the weight, it won't be much anyhow." The youngster took in the tone of self-assurance of the visitor. He cast a second glance at him, scented the "Indian" (i.e. the Spaniard come back from the Indies) and guessing he might be the family's son, so long expected, ran upstairs.

Old Esquivel and his daughter came clattering down the racketty wooden steps. Vicente was taken aback when he saw his father and sister. He would not have recognised them had he seen them in the street. His father was a white-haired, wrinkled and in every way "shrunk" old man ; his sister, over-dressed, over-painted, over-bold in looks and demeanour looked like a—well, he did not like her looks. They, in their turn, had hesitated on seeing him and stood at the entrance to the shop, wondering. "Is that you?" she asked, "Vicente, my brother?" Old Esquivel had by now seen his vanished boy through the hard features of the strange soldier. He threw his arms round his son's neck. They were all thinking of Susana, dead in Toledo of grief and shame.

Marta took her brother upstairs. Vicente was impressed by a certain air of gaudy prosperity about the place. Too much red brocade and too much gold braid over the brocade, if not for his taste, at any

rate for his liking. "You seem to have inherited a fortune!" he remarked pointedly. The remark was addressed to his sister and not to his father, a fact which oddly enough the other two Esquivels took as quite natural and matter of course. Old Esquivel volunteered an explanation which seemed odder still to Vicente. "She is a great success here and has as many friends as she wants."

Marta changed the conversation. "Tell us about yourself and the Indies," she said and she sat on one of her beautiful red and gold chairs. She was wearing a silk and velvet dress, the silk green, the velvet black, and she had a gold chain round her neck. Vicente spoke to them of the wonders of Mexico and kept them listening open-mouthed for a long while. When he came to describing Moteczuma's treasure, their admiration knew no bounds, and both father and daughter dreamt of boarding the next caravel for Veracruz. "This," said Vicente carelessly, and he drew the heart of jade, his, the wrong one, from his pocket, "this comes from Moteczuma's treasure." Marta seized it with eager fingers. "I have never seen this stone before! Give it to me!" He shook his head. "It is promised elsewhere already." And she, who knew him well, said, "You liar!" He was not in the least put out and he grinned fatuously, as if she had complimented him on his skill. "And by the way, did you receive my letter telling you about Alonso's witch-stone?" Old Esquivel smiled to himself: "I should say we did. It has done its work already." "Well," retorted Vicente, "his magic stone is just like this." Marta was very much interested. "We ought to show it to García." But her father objected: "He would be quite capable of bagging it."

"Who is García?" asked Vicente. A light wave of natural colour passed under the artificial colour which covered Marta's cheeks. Old Esquivel explained: "He is the chief clerk in the Inquisition Office here——" "One of the chief clerks," corrected Marta; and her father proceeded: "He often comes to see us; he has been most helpful in the Manrique affair." Vicente asked: "How is it going?" "Very well, thank you," answered his father ironically. "That brood will never see Torremala again. We are seeing to that. And then the new lord, Don Gonzalo Manrique de Lara, is most generous. He sends a regular monthly sum, enough to keep us going and to retain the good will of some of our friends . . ." ". . . like García?" put in Vicente. But Marta returned hotly: "No, sir! García has never asked for money, nor does he need it." "I dare say he gets something else for his trouble," retorted Vicente with a stare at his overpainted sister. "That is none of your business," she replied. Old Esquivel was worried and confused. "Now, now——"

"Sir!" shouted the apprentice in the staircase: "The Licenciate García to see my lady."

The Licenciante Isidoro García was a most important person. He looked about forty-five. His hair and moustache were kept strictly black despite nature's endeavours to follow her course. He was solemn, grave and formal, and he spoke accordingly. His baggy cheeks seemed to be just deflated from a previous effort at swelling his hollow voice. He dressed in official black but wore a golden chain round his neck and a false diamond at his right-hand middle finger. "No need to present him to me!" he said to old Esquivel, thrusting his body backwards with a deprecating gesture. "Do I not guess?" (He had obtained the information from the apprentice below.) "Let me congratulate you three, and as for you, Sir Vicente Esquivel, welcome back to your country!"

Vicente eyed him with curiosity. "You would be interested in the news I bring," García went on. "The Holy Office magistrates have at last made up their minds." He turned to Marta and said: "You know what I mean." Marta turned to her brother. "They have been arguing and arguing for months whether they should or should not apply torture to Isabel Manrique . . ." Then, to García: ". . . and so what have they decided?" García smiled superciliously. "Oh, you need not ask. They have decided to put her to the question. Tomorrow." He turned again to Vicente: "You must not mind us too much, Sir Vicente Esquivel. We in the old country are not as quick as you in the Indies, where you conquer a whole island as big as Spain or Seville in one month. We take six months to find out whether a woman in whose bedroom—for it was in her bedroom!—we find the Thora and the Old Testament in Hebrew, is a secret Jew or not!" He smiled significantly, showing a long, yellow eyetooth under his jet-black moustache. Vicente said nothing. Marta commented: "Of course, that is because she is a Manrique. Had she been one of us! . . ." The Licenciante stared at her with his small black pupils shining in his protruding, yellow eyeballs: "We shall see, my dear lady. We shall see whether the name Manrique will screen her from the Inquisition and whether it will screen . . ." He grew mysterious and added with a significant gesture of his finger: ". . . the very heir himself. The moment he lands in this country . . ."

Vicente broke in: "What? Don't you know he is . . . Well, at any rate, he must be here . . . he sailed fully a month before I did." They were all astonished. Manrique had not arrived. "Perhaps a storm . . . or pirates . . ." There was a silence. "That would simplify matters! . . ." remarked Vicente. "Too much!" dropped Marta, who saw the loss of the subsidy paid them by Manrique de Lara. García

twisted his thickly waxed moustache and proceeded to expound the right doctrine: "The affairs of the Inquisition must be slow. The longer they last, the better. There are always people who live by them and we must be considerate to those interests which grow and thrive under our shadow, so to speak." He stopped, with his eyes fixed on the heart of jade which Vicente Esquivel had put round his neck. "I have just read of a jewel exactly like that in a secret report sent to us . . . Of course, in the very report on Alonso Manrique. Is this the jewel itself?" "No," answered Vicente Esquivel, "or I should not be wearing it." García realised how imprudent his question had been. "Of course. A most diabolic jewel, evidently." He was fascinated by the heart of jade. "Would you allow me? . . . I have never seen a stone such as this before . . . It seems to me you would do well to enclose it with the report to us. It would lend a singular strength to all you say. I would see to it that you got it back." Vicente demurred. García added pointedly: "It might be safer also, since the other jewel identical with this is the chief piece for the accusation of witchcraft . . ." He stared significantly at Vicente, who argued: "No one need know I have one like it." But García, still staring at him, retorted: "These things always get-known."

15

The tribunal which dealt with Isabel Manrique's case met in a high-vaulted room of one of the oldest monasteries in Seville. Its yellowish white walls were flooded with light through a window which showed the colossal thickness of the building—fully six feet of brick and mortar under the clean surface of its austere whitewash. Opposite the window, a long, plain oak-table, robust and massive enough to stand comparison with the massive dimensions of the hall. At the table the four inquisitors and the two attendant priests sat on straight-backed, wide-armed oak-chairs. On the table, the green Cross of the Holy Office.

The debate was led by a fiery, black-eyed, earnest-looking Dominican, in a black frock. He was addressing his remarks to another monk in a brown frock, who sat at the end of the table, an older, milder and smaller man. "We decided it in your absence, true, but in all honesty. We did not mean to take advantage—" The older friar raised his hand: "For the Lord's sake, Father, do not imagine—" "Very well. I shall leave that aside," retorted Father Theodore, the acting chairman. "And I shall not haggle over our right or otherwise to consider the decision as firm." "It is not firm," quietly but firmly asserted the old friar. "Your Paternity knows full

well that no Tribunal of the Holy Office can decide to put an accused person to the torture without the acquiescence of all its members without exception. And I cannot acquiesce. Doña Isabel Manrique is a transparently honest soul. We have heard her time and again. She has explained everything to our complete satisfaction. There is no reason why——” The chairman cut in : “ Yes. And Ruiz, whom you also thought a transparently honest soul, was found to be the rabbi of a secret community of twenty-five Jews. And Maria Sanginés, whom you also thought a transparently honest soul, was proved to have buried her husband and son with Jewish rites. And——” The little friar smiled a modest but unashamed smile while the other four men kept an embarrassed silence. “ I have often been wrong that way,” he replied. “ It does not weigh on my soul. But I have sometimes been wrong the other way and . . . agreed to put to the torture beings who turned out to be as honest after we had broken them at the wheel as before. Does not that thought harrow your Paternity at times ? ”

A well-fed, reasonable-looking friar who sat between the two protagonists tried to mediate : “ Why bring in past histories ? I would ask Father Miguel to bear in mind that Isabel Manrique had in her possession a complete collection of the Jewish sacred books ; that she speaks and writes Hebrew ; that her father was a rabbi who remained unconverted and had to leave the country, though she was his only daughter ; and that she has told us herself that she taught Hebrew to her son.” “ On whom,” added the chairman, “ I have just received a secret report accusing him of witchcraft.” The fat friar went on : “ That is another story, Father Theodore. What I want to ask Father Miguel is whether he thinks in his conscience that he can overlook these reasons for suspicion in view of the hundreds of cases of secret addiction to the Jewish faith which have been proved by the Holy Office, many of them by us, by him in fact.”

Father Miguel was pale and his grey eyes were sad and discouraged. He was on the point of yielding. “ Let us hear the accused again,” he said. Father Theodore threw his arms up to Heaven, represented on the spot by the vault of the room, and his long black sleeves fell down showing his hairy arms. “ Once again ! . . . ” He shrugged his shoulders : “ Let it be, for the sake of the Lord’s Passion.”

While Isabel was fetched from the adjoining prison, the six members of the tribunal went on their knees and prayed. “ Ave Maria ! ” said an officer at the door. The monks and the priests sat again and Isabel was brought in. She had aged considerably since her husband’s death, and her hair, once so luminous, was now silver-and-gold. She was plumper in body, but her face was much thinner and paler ; her lips had lost all colour. Her eyes were red with weeping. The little friar

addressed her as soon as she had sat down. "Sister, there is one point we want to clear up. Did your father ever seek to influence you in your religious faith?" Isabel answered: "Of course he did." Father Theodore stared at Father Miguel triumphantly. Isabel went on: "Before his conversion——" Father Theodore interrupted: "You mean before *your* conversion——" Isabel was put out and kept silent for a while. Father Theodore was impatient: "Speak. Do not spin tales in your memory . . . or in your imagination." Tears came to Isabel's eyes but she kept full control of her thoughts. "Let me explain. I was converted in the course of discussions between my father and the Prior of Moor's Hill. While this discussion lasted, my father did all he could to keep me in his faith. Then I was baptised and I did not see him again till he left Spain, many years later." Father Miguel asked: "Did he try to win you back?" "No. By then, he was himself a Christian."

The monks and priests were astounded. "You had not told us that!" said Father Theodore reproachfully. "I had no occasion," explained Isabel: "How is it then that he left the country?" asked the relentless monk. "Because he thought it more Christian to undergo the misery of his flock than to leave them at the time of their trial." This answer produced devastating effects on the tribunal. Father Miguel smiled his sad smile. Father Theodore was most excited: "But that is sheer heresy. Had he been christened?" "No, sir, but he thought himself a Christian in spirit." Father Theodore turned to Father Miguel: "What does your Paternity say now? Is this woman herself a sound Christian? Will your Paternity take responsibility——" The two priests whispered to each other and shook their heads. Father Theodore saw his opportunity. "Is the decision unanimous?" He looked round. Father Miguel did not react. "Let it be so, in the Lord's name."

16

Isabel was tortured that very day in the presence of the whole tribunal, as was required by the bye-laws of the Holy Office. No specific questions were ever put to the person on the rack. Isabel felt her limbs torn out of their natural frame, helpless. There was nothing she could do to put an end to her torment. Father Theodore looked on stern and grave, fighting against his own compassion. Father Miguel wept and prayed. He had never been able to see torment administered without suffering torment himself and he took it as an offering of sacrifice for his own sins. In the end the doctor intervened and declared Isabel unable to withstand further torture.

She was allowed an hour to recover, after which Father Theodore

asked her to sign a statement declaring that her father's action in leaving Spain with his still Jewish flock, though himself a believer in Christ, was an abominable betrayal of the Christian faith. She shed abundant tears and, though hardly able to move in her bed, joined her hands and implored: "Good Father, do not ask me to do that. Who am I to judge my father and condemn him? No. Put me back on the wheel, rather than that." Father Miguel suggested that it should be enough for her to state that she would take as good and right the ruling of the Church on such a matter. "I am but an ignorant woman," said Isabel through her tears, "and will readily believe that what learned men in the Church say is right. But I——" Father Miguel beckoned her not to proceed. He was drafting a formula with a long black quill which scratched a thick rough paper. He read it aloud. Father Theodore took the paper from his hands and read it again, pondering over every word of it. "It will do!" he grunted and they set her free. "When can I go home?" she asked. And Father Miguel explained: "The formalities may take about a week."

17

Xuchitl spent her first day in Torremala resting in the house and garden of her husband's grandfather. She was infinitely sad over the disaster which had befallen Alonso's mother. Alonso spoke so often and so lovingly about her that Xuchitl longed to see her and to throw her arms round the neck of her lovely Spanish mother. She was beginning to suspect that she was going to be a mother herself and she had planned to tell Isabel first before speaking to Alonso, for she was shy and felt in need of feminine support. The two Suárez women, Casilda and Catalina, were kind enough but they were not the company she needed in her wonderful adventure. She was discovering a new world and needed less simple souls than the stern though friendly Casilda and the sweet but somewhat childish Catalina. They would look at her as if she were one of those curiosities which her father used to keep in his zoological gardens, and they would ask her the most naïve questions about her native land.

In the afternoon Alonso took her for a walk, to introduce her, so to speak, to the landscape he knew so well . . . and she also, for he had described it to her many a time. She was able to see it with an eye perhaps more sensitive to the beauty of nature than Europe had as yet developed; and she took a deep pleasure in the harmony of colour which she found everywhere—the deep brown earth, the delicate grey-green of the olive trees, the glorious glossy green of the foliage of the orange trees, constellated with golden globes, and above

all, the joy of her eyes, the fields of ripe corn in whose serried ranks stray poppies dangled their languorous heads like loose women in the ranks of an army. They sat by a path on a hillside and Alonso, without the slightest shade of feeling, said : " That is our house." Xuchitl saw the house of the Manriques at closer quarters than the first day from the hill. By the side of her father's palaces, it looked pretty modest, though it was easily the biggest house she had seen in Spain, and was impressive enough in its sturdy simplicity, hewn in granite by a clear, strong but simple mind. She was moved, but not by the house itself, not by its shape or site, but by the fact that there, under that roof, beyond those fields, in that orchard and garden, had grown that man whose hand was now in hers and whose destiny was hers and whose son was beginning to live in her womb. They looked at the house in silence, then rose again and walked on till they passed the brook and went up the hill he had ridden every morning for so many months, and at last saw the monastery. Alonso felt a pang in his heart at the thought of Father Guzmán, no longer there. What would he think of this soul he had conquered for Christendom ? " What is that ? " she asked, pointing to a solitary little whitewashed house with a tiny tower and bell which could be seen on a peak above the monastery. " A hermitage." Alonso had to explain this curious form of devotional isolation. " Yes. We also have men like that," she observed. " There is a tradition," he explained, " that as soon as the hermit dies, another one comes and takes his place. No one knows how."

18

That night Alonso and Suárez sat together till quite late, ostensibly to transact a certain number of affairs which had to be settled before Alonso left for Seville to visit his mother, which he meant to do early the following day. Beneath this avowed reason, both men were secretly hoping to find out something about the ghost which had been seen haunting the garden and which was now a reality even for Alonso. He felt he would leave more at rest in his mind if he had cleared up that mystery, for he had reluctantly decided not to take Xuchitl to Seville till he found out the position there. So they went on talking about business, urgent and not urgent, and even letting time go by in silence till midnight came and went and one o'clock passed ; but though they were sitting at the edge of the patio, from which they overlooked nearly the whole garden and orchard, they saw no trace of the ghost and, yielding at last to sleepiness, they withdrew to bed.

After a brief sleep, however, Alonso found himself unable to rest. He stole out of the room and went to the garden. About midway

across the garden, a whitish imp seemed to be moving slowly here and there in the dark. It was, or seemed to be, in mid-air, perhaps about five feet above the ground; straight, cloudy, grey-white, it seemed to rise in the air in thin threads of vapour which coalesced into a slightly more consistent small cloud the size of a man's hand. It stood motionless for a while, disappeared altogether and reappeared farther away. Alonso moved towards it. The imp stood motionless. Alonso advanced farther till he made up his mind that the white-grey, cloudish imp was a beard. The outline of the old man's head could be seen round and about it, yes, and the shoulders, and a kind of monkish frock he was wearing. Alonso had found the ghost.

He was a very old man, whether he belonged to this or to the other world, a point on which Alonso had not yet made up his mind. He followed the mysterious apparition at a cautious distance through the orchard and down to the edge of the river which bounded the garden—where the ghost stopped just under a kind of sentry-box made of stone, stood there as if he were some saint specially made for that niche, with one finger on his mouth, and pointed with the other hand at a spot on the ground nearby. The gesture had so much authority that Alonso turned to look in the direction of the commanding finger. A white paper shone on the path in the dark. Alonso stooped to pick up the paper, but found it much heavier than he expected. It was attached to what looked like a heavy though small steel box. He turned round towards the ghost. The ghost had disappeared.

He took the box home, lit a lamp and examined it. He found it open. It was obviously of Moorish design. He found first a paper addressed to his mother: "My lady: You do not know me, but I know you. I owe you the best moments which I have tasted in my life—the only ones, indeed. You do not know why and need not. But I am a grateful man. Enclosed are three keys and a paper with instructions. If you are ever in danger and need help, read the paper, use the keys and I shall rise from my dust to help you.—Isaac Avanel."

Alonso laid the paper on the table. His mother had sometimes talked to him about that miser whom his father held in abomination. She spoke of his last day with the charitable spirit she brought to everything she touched. The past rising before his eyes after so much life had flowed over it made him wonder at the very words of the paper: "I shall rise from the dust." His mother must have been so lovely that even a skinflint like Isaac Avanel had been moved by her beauty. Where was she now? Would this box come in time to save her? Who could this ghost be who had kept it away for so long and suddenly brought it back at the eleventh hour? Could it be Isaac himself? Was it the eleventh hour? He went on examining the box. He found three keys and a sealed paper. He broke the seal. The paper

contained a set of instructions on how to find the three coffers which Isaac meant to leave Salomé ha-Levy.

He hid the box and its contents and went back to bed. The matter had to be carefully considered.

19

Alonso lay awake for the rest of the night. Was it wise? All this Jewish flavour added to their all too many connections with the suspected race! . . . He decided to find the coffers first and then to consider what use, if any, he would make of them. But as a precaution, he thought it best to do everything unaided and in secret.

Next morning he announced that he had to postpone his journey to Seville till the afternoon. He spent the morning studying Isaac's instructions and the spot under the bridge, which he examined carefully. Late in the afternoon he left on horseback and remained resting and sleeping in a wood outside the city till well after midnight. He had taken with him every tool he needed for an operation which he had thoroughly planned during the morning. He returned to Torremala following the river-bed, nearly empty in that hot season, noiseless and unseen. He set to work at once. The very planks Isaac had put there so many years ago were still where he had left them—untouched. He removed them, found the spot where the brick was set in a different pattern and uncovered the three coffers. They were heavy. He hesitated for a while, looking at his newly acquired treasure, wondering how to transport it home without disclosing its secret; and finally adopted the plan which seemed the least risky. He took them home one after the other and threw them over the hedge into the garden, down by the river-end.

As he was coming for the third time to the spot under the bridge, he was shocked to find a man standing there before the open cavity. He approached cautiously. The man did not budge. Alonso came forward, having swiftly resolved that the least risky course was to face the issue and at all costs to secure the last box which still remained in the hole in the wall. The man turned round and smiled at Alonso, showing an irregular row of black teeth. An unkempt greyish beard fell down to his chest, which showed almost naked under an open, very dirty frock. Alonso recognised Calero. He felt somehow reassured. "H'm," snorted the fool, "I guessed it was here he had hidden it!" Alonso offered him a silver coin. Calero shook his head: "Coppers only!" And without even waiting for one, he limped away. Alonso saw him skirt the river's edge, turn the corner and melt into the night.

When he found himself alone again, he resumed his work. After

the third coffer had been thrown into the garden over the hedge, he came round by the front door, woke up young Suárez and told him that he had felt unwell and had returned to have a good night's sleep before proceeding to Seville. He did not however retire till he had secured the three coffers from the garden.

Nor could he resist the temptation to open them before going to bed. The sight of the fortune which two of them revealed—welcome as it was in the circumstances—was as nothing compared with the astonishment which the third and what it contained caused in his mind. It was a set of papers on Esquivel. Isaac seemed to have put together every possible paper in which old Esquivel's crimes and misdeamours had been recorded by the authorities of the several towns in which he had operated—Christian and Moorish alike. But the jewel of the collection was a paper written in Hebrew by Esquivel himself, in which he declared his own name to be Salomon Yahuda and in which, under the most solemn oaths, he promised the rabbi of Zaragoza to remain throughout his life faithful to the Jewish law and to bring up his children in the faith of Moses.

20

Next day he left for Seville with his packet of documents about Esquivel. He had travelled three-quarters of the way when a messenger arrived from Seville to announce to Suárez that Doña Isabel, set free, was awaiting him at the convent of the Carmelite nuns in Seville. Alonso was not aware of this. The courier with the vital news passed him by as he was riding towards Seville ; It was Alonso's plan to call first at the offices of the Inquisition to obtain permission to visit his mother ; then to call on Puertocarrero, who lived in Seville, in the hope that his one-time companion in Veracruz would give him a bed and a table during his stay in the city.

It was about midday, one hot summer day, when he called at the offices of the Inquisition. As soon as he gave his name in a room in which about ten clerks were working, the Licenciado García, who was one of them, sprang to his feet and vanished. Presently a "familiar" of the Holy Office appeared on the stage with his wand of office in his hand and asked Alonso : "Are you Don Alonso Manrique ?" And on the affirmative gesture of Alonso, he added : "Give yourself up to the Holy Office."

He was taken to a prison cell, and all his papers—including the precious documents about Esquivel—went to increase the voluminous files of the Manrique case.

PART XVII

FAITH WITHOUT BLASPHEMY

I

TIME went by and no one came to fetch Isabel. Suárez had trusted that Alonso would see to it and bring his mother back. He was, however, deeply upset when a week later, a second message reached him from Isabel. "That means," he thought, "that some mishap has overtaken Alonso." Suárez had a pretty clear idea of what this mishap had been, but he remained silent and uncommunicative about his thoughts and plans on account of Xuchitl. He decided to go to Seville and see for himself.

He went first to the offices of the Inquisition and found that his misgivings were justified. He then went to the Convent of the Carmelites, where he found his mistress very much exhausted by her ordeals. He had tried to see Alonso but was told that visits would not be permitted till the prisoner had been twenty days in jail. There was nothing to do but to take Doña Isabel home, and even this could only be done by short stages in view of the poor state of her health. He dared not tell her of her son's plight, nor even of her son's arrival from the Indies. He thought it better to wait till they had reached home. Once or twice on the way he was afraid that Isabel would not stand the travelling. In the end, however, he reached Torremala and had her comfortably settled in her bed. Casilda and Catalina were shocked at the sight of the wreck which they received, remembering how, though aged, Isabel still looked flourishing and beautiful when she had left half a year earlier to be examined by the Inquisition.

Suárez began to prepare her for the news. "Your Mercy will soon see Don Alonso who had gone to work for Your Mercy's deliverance before we knew of the decision to set you free." Isabel was astonished. "What, is my son in Spain?" "Yes, madam. He arrived unexpectedly . . . a few days ago. He meant to come at once to visit Your Mercy but was advised to call on the authorities first, on your behalf. His wife is here." Xuchitl was waiting by the door, longing to see Alonso's mother. "Here? Bring her to me!" said Isabel. Xuchitl ran to her and fell into her arms.

Xuchitl lifted her face, looked at Isabel and was overjoyed to see how she resembled Alonso. Her hands caressed Isabel's hair and forehead. She kissed her forehead and whispered: "I love you!" Isabel

had been a little disconcerted by her exotic looks, but she was conquered by her sweet voice, her elegant yet wholly spontaneous gestures and her affectionate attitude. "Where is Alonso? How is he?" she asked. "He left me to see you," answered Xuchitl. "He must have changed his plans. He could think of nothing else but you. He was so unhappy to know you were in prison!"

There was nothing for it but to be patient. Isabel had no idea of the real situation. She smiled at Xuchitl and said: "I am too weak to speak, but not to listen to you. Tell me, how did you meet my son?" Xuchitl's heart sank at the memory of the situation in which she was when she cast eyes on him for the first time; when he had saved her by his God-timed arrival from that appalling sacrifice of which she shuddered to think. How could she tell that sweet woman, lying in bed after her own sufferings? She chattered to her about Mexico, her people and her ways, keeping at a safe distance from gruesome details, and softly withdrew on tiptoe when she found that Isabel had gone to sleep.

2

Every now and then during that night, Xuchitl, Casilda or Catalina went to Isabel's bedroom to inquire whether she needed anything. But Isabel, exhausted by her trials, had sunk into a sleep which seemed so peaceful to the three women that they respected it. They knew nothing of her physical sufferings of which she had not spoken, and did not realise how weak she was. They withdrew to their own quarters and soon the whole house, with the exception only of old Suárez, was asleep.

The old steward was still hankering after that ghost. He remained on the look-out for him till very late in the night and at last when he "knew" by experience that the ghost would no longer come, he withdrew also. All fell into the silence of sleep and the peace of oblivion.

Isabel slept perhaps the deepest of all. It was her first night, after six months of anguished absence, in her own surroundings, in the home of her childhood. That indescribable something which is neither sight nor scent nor murmur, nor the way things are placed and move about and succeed each other, and which yet contains all of them, but adds to them a feeling, a lived thrill and a kind of sensuous flavour whereby the place and the moment we are in seem to touch the deepest fibres of our being, that living wave of the past and the present rolled into one had penetrated her, so that though free in the spaces of sleep, she knew she was at home, her old home, beyond her married life in Torremala, which now seemed to her but a brief episode. . . . She was Salomé ha-Levy again. Possibly under the pressure of the inquisitors,

she had gone back to her pre-Christian times, and was living again in those far-off, sunny days of her youth, when as a young girl she was every day discovering new beauties and marvels in the realm of the mind as in that of men and things. She saw herself slim and golden-haired, walking home one morning, feeling that someone was following her steps, not daring to look round and inquire, not worried about it either ; she saw herself arriving home and turning round on the very door-step discovering that on the opposite side of the street an old, sharp-nosed, small-eyed, not very clean looking man was gaping at her open-mouthed. And then she saw herself entering the hall and later the study—where she was now sleeping and dreaming of it—and then she saw her own father sitting as he often did, on that wooden seat by the door which led to the garden, just as he was sitting there now looking at her, though of course, he was not so old then, nor was his beard so long, nor so white, but he used to look at her with exactly the same tender eyes, yet not so sadly as he was looking at her now, since after all, now she had undergone a terrible trial, and he knew it, though of course he had not been told, since he had not been in Seville and knew nobody in the country, for as a matter of fact he had been living in Flanders and never wrote to her for fear of making matters worse, because he knew how precarious her situation was as a Jewess, and that was no doubt why he only came to see her by night, though she could hardly understand how it was possible for him to be in Flanders and at the same time in Torremala and how he could come all the way from Flanders and sit exactly where he used to sit in the old days as on that day when she had entered the room after she had seen the old man looking at her and had said to him : “ Father ! ”

“ Yes, my soul,” he answered. Isabel woke up. She rubbed her eyes. There was a faint light in the room, shed by a tiny night-flame burning under an image of the Virgin in a corner. “ But you are here and not in Flanders ! ” she said, endeavouring to disentangle what she actually saw from what she had just dreamt. “ Yes. I am here. I have been here for some time. I arrived a few weeks after . . . you had left.” Isabel was stirred to the depths. She sat up, opened her arms. Her old father came to her and embraced and kissed her. He knelt by her side, took her hand in his and prayed in silence for a brief moment. “ I became a Franciscan monk soon after we arrived in Antwerp,” he began. “ I knew it about a year later through Father Guzmán,” she said. And he went on : “ When you were . . . taken away, Father Guzmán wrote to me. He knew his death was coming. He explained to me where and how I could find a present left for you by an old sinner you will not remember, one Isaac Av——” Isabel had the feeling that she had just seen him. “ But he was at the door——” she cried out, and then passing her hand over her forehead : “ It is an

old story. I do remember him." Her father proceeded: "The key of it was in a Moorish steel box. Father Guzmán was rather uneasy about it just as I had been when I received it from Isaac's hands and gave it to him years ago. However, he explained it all to me and left instructions to have his letter sent to me if he came to die. When I received his letter, the news of your trials reached me also. I decided to come in person. The Lord showed his hand by taking to His peace the hermit of the Hilltop. I took the hermitage. I watched this garden by night in the hope of seeing you back. I came under the brook by the underground passage which we had made to escape during anti-Jewish riots in the old days. You know, the opening is in that little stone building by the hedge. I should not wonder if some of the members of your household took me for a ghost. I did not want to show my hand. It would not have helped you had it been known that the old rabbi had returned, even though now he is a servant of Christ, more devoted than ever." He crossed himself. "But I felt certain that the box would help more than I would hinder, even if I were seen, and so I was glad I could give it to your son a few nights ago."

"Did you see him? Oh, you saw him!" There was almost a reproach in her voice. "Yes. I did. But I did not tell him who I was. He is a fine man. He will defend you . . . and himself." The old hermit had been whispering so as not to be discovered there with his daughter. There was a long silence. "Father," she said, "I feel no longer in need of being defended. All I hope is that I will not . . . go before I have cast eyes on him." Her voice was thin. He noticed it for the first time. Till then he had thought that she was also whispering, but now he felt that she spoke no louder because she lacked the strength. He felt the beat of her pulse. It was hardly perceptible. "Be calm. Trust in Him Who knows best. Do not speak." There was a long silence again, much longer than the first. "She must have gone to sleep," he thought. He passed his hand over her lovely features. She did not wake up.

He was too rich in spiritual experience to be upset. He remained there motionless for a long time, beholding the beloved shape which had housed her spirit. He then recited the prayer for the dead. He looked around the room. There was a small Crucifix on one of the walls. He put it in her hands. He went into the garden, cut a white rose and laid it at her feet. Then he slipped out, treading lightly over the garden, and vanished into the night.

3

The Licenciata García opened the box of documents found in Alonso's luggage and gloated over its contents. Why ! Hebrew pages and more Hebrew pages ! He was so excited that, without waiting to examine the documents in Latin and in Castillian which lay at the bottom of the box under the Hebrew and the Arabic texts, he rushed in to Father Miguel : " Here, Reverend Father, this is the kind of poison which your favourite friend Alonso Manrique was found carting about ! " And he dumped the box on the friar's desk.

Father Miguel, unlike the Licenciata García, was a Hebrew scholar. He glanced at the first document and his eyes grew wider and wider with astonishment while García, watching him, winked to himself out of sheer delight. But the astonishment which he was reading in Father Miguel's eyes was not of the sort which he imagined. The good friar had soon realised that Alonso Manrique had got hold of the most damning collection of documents against his accusers. The Manriques were not supposed to know that the Esquivels were their accusers. They would not therefore have been able to counter accusation with accusation. But since the documents had come into the hands of the Holy Office through no direct action of Manrique the question did not arise. It behoved the Holy Office to probe the Esquivel case on its own merits, in the light of these documents so providentially disclosed. And the documents could not be more deadly.

When the Tribunal met that afternoon, Father Miguel had already prepared a circumstantial report on the Esquivels. He put it to his brother judges that the documents revealed old Esquivel to be such a scoundrel and such a heretic that the Holy Office would stand dishonoured if it went on basing its prosecutions on evidence of such a disreputable origin. Father Theodore was dumbfounded. He was fiery, fierce, uncompromising, but honest to the core. Father Miguel's revelations filled him with holy anger and he suggested that the three Esquivels should be imprisoned at once. Father Miguel, however, demurred. In his opinion the case against old Esquivel was overwhelming but, though he knew that a good deal could be said against his daughter on general grounds, there was so far nothing to justify the imprisonment of either Marta or Vicente. It was decided to send officers at once to arrest old Esquivel.

" That, however, should not prevent us from examining Alonso Manrique's case on its own merits." Such was Father Theodore's first comment after the documents of the Moorish box had been disposed of. And he went on : " I hold that his magical stone is most dangerous. I have experienced its diabolic powers myself. I slept with it round

my neck and I can assure your Paternities that it has enough power of temptation to devastate many a Christian soul." He blushed red as he spoke and the veins of his bullish neck stood out swollen on his hot skin.

"I do not see how that can be," put in, old and pale, Father Miguel, "for it is I who slept with it round my neck last night, and I must say I felt no effects whatsoever." As he spoke, Father Miguel showed the Heart of Jade on the palm of his thin trembling hand. "But," stammered Father Theodore, "here it is!" And he showed Esquivel's heart of jade which he had taken away quietly the night before in the belief that he had secured the diabolic jewel which called forth the temptation of love's hell. And Father Miguel retorted with an ever so slight edge of uncharitable satisfaction: "Curious! Now see, the real witch-jewel is this one, the one I have. It is bigger, as you see, and it has the trace of a tooth here . . . everything as described in our papers. The one Your Paternity has slept with belongs to Esquivel and has no witchcraft about it. At least, so we thought. Yet it would seem that the witchcraft is on Esquivel's jewel and not on Manrique's . . . if we are to judge by my experience and that of Your Paternity."

The two priests cast mischievous side-glances at each other, with their noses on their files. They were secular clergy and as such, in a constant state of subconscious antagonism towards the monks. Here was a monk suffering from the pangs of chastity, who had taken the first opportunity to let himself go, shaking off his responsibility on to an outlandish jewel! That would teach them to insult poor secular priests who had to move about in a world of pretty, tempting women, struggling, not always successfully, to keep their virtue intact! Father Theodore was fully conscious of the whole situation. It made him the more austere, the less inclined to leniency. "We must not rush matters," he said. "Let us have the papers thoroughly examined. God's enemies are most skilful in the arts of forgery."

"But meanwhile," pointed out Father Miguel, "let us put Esquivel in jail." Father Theodore observed: "By all means, it has already been so decided." And then, without the trace of a smile the younger of the two priests put in: "Reverend Fathers, we are but your humble advisers, without a right to vote. But may I suggest that Esquivel's son, the soldier from the Indies, should also be arrested? I hold him to be the most dangerous of the lot." With raised eyebrows, Father Theodore asked: "How do you see that?" And the young priest answered: "Forgive me, Father, is he not the owner of that jewel which has tormented Your Paternity with its diabolical powers?" Father Theodore blushed again: "Let it be done!" he grunted.

And that is how and why Vicente Esquivel was imprisoned by the Inquisition.

4

When Catalina entered Isabel's room in the morning she stepped back and cried out: "Mother!" Frightened at the tone of her daughter's voice, Casilda rushed to the spot. Mother and daughter entered the room together hand in hand for mutual support, on tiptoe, hardly daring to breathe. They crossed themselves devoutly. Tears came to their eyes. They fell on their knees and prayed. They rose to their feet, drew close to the bed and were lost in wondering at everything they saw. "The Lord have her sweet soul! How lovely she looks!" "And see, mother, a rose at her feet!" said Catalina. "And her hands so neatly folded . . . And the Crucifix!" said Casilda, lost in wonder. "She must have got out of her bed . . ." suggested the girl. "How could she?" asked her mother. "And there were no flowers in her room, for I took them out for the night. So how could she . . .?" They kept silence for a while. "It looks as if someone had been here," concluded Catalina, and she went to report the matter to her father. Suárez entered the bedroom on tiptoe, crossed himself, knelt at the foot of the bed with his wife and daughter and prayed for the soul of his departed mistress, whom he had loved dearly. Then he rose to his feet and pondered over the situation. "That," he thought silently, "can have been no one but the ghost." He was deeply concerned about the whole affair. He dreaded having anything to do with the Inquisition. God knows. Suppose the ghost had killed her . . . She looked peaceful enough, though . . . "Hear me," he said to his wife and daughter, "for it is most important: no details about this to any one, do you hear? The Crucifix . . . the rose . . . nothing. Not a word."

His thoughts turned to Alonso. What a deep sorrow for him! He would not see his mother again, just because a couple of scoundrels had chosen to cast a shadow of suspicion on her and on him, and because the Holy Office had believed them long enough for them to achieve their purpose. There was no news of him yet. He must have fallen a victim to the same power. Suárez made up his mind to leave for Seville as soon as the funeral duties which retained him in Tórremala had been discharged.

5

Xuchitl leant over the bed and kissed the face which reminded her so much of Alonso's. How deeply would Alonso feel that loss just then, when he had hoped to live close to his mother for years to come. She grieved for him. Isabel looked so peaceful that Xuchitl was sure she was now at rest. But Alonso! Her thoughts went from the dead mother to the absent son, passing through herself, where they did not dare to dwell. An underground anxiety was rising in her bosom about her own situation. Alone? How lonely she felt in that unknown land, amongst people who, however kind to her, were so distant in their ways, in their very roots, from all she felt and was! Isabel had been for her like an island in that sea of solitude—an island now for ever sunk beneath the vast waters. And he? Where was he? The days went by and he did not return, did not even write. . . . Could it be? . . . She shivered. Would he be undergoing the same persecutions which had exhausted his mother's life? He had always spoken of it as a possibility.

She spent the day in prayer and meditation by the bedside of Isabel.

In the afternoon the body was taken away. Xuchitl could hardly bear to let it go. She had grown so fond of Isabel's lovely features! And she felt as if she had lost Alonso a second time. "Lost?" she repeated to herself inwardly. "How foolish! I have not lost him. He is only away for a time." How many hours, days, she spent in this state of tension, raised above daily events by her very anxiety, solitude, inner torment, she did not know. She remembered that she had had a talk with Suárez about Seville and about going to see what was going on there and coming back to report, but it all sounded as if another person were using her voice, and she heard it from the outside.

One day she went out for a long walk to free herself from herself. She followed the same route she had once followed with Alonso. She hardly saw the landscape around her. Her eyes were in Tetzcuco: her father's garden, the water-birds, the woods behind the palace which climbed up the hill, up the mountain, till they reached the snow, then the blue sky above. Up there, on the edge of the sky under her eyes there was a small white house with a tiny tower and a bell. She walked in that direction, drawn to the hermitage by some inexplicable magnet. There was a slope of sandy soil on which grew sturdy plants of lavender and thyme and rosemary, then a small hedge of myrtles, and a well. By the well, a stone-bench. On the bench, an old man, very old. She could not see his face, for he was reading turned the other way. As her steps made the sand crackle, he turned round. She drew her hand to her heart and stopped for breath. She had seen Alonso as an old man.

Alonso's eyes, old and disillusioned, without fire, above hope, calm and deep, were now staring at her. They grew soft, then they smiled. The old man rose, came to her with his trembling hands stretched out and said : " Come here, my daughter. Since the Lord has brought you to me, let us trust the Lord. The musical quality of his voice moved her solitary soul to the verge of tears. " But, father, who—— ? " I am your husband's grandfather, the father of Isabel."

Xuchitl let herself fall into his arms. She was exhausted by solitude and longed for someone close to her. This old man was now the only soul who could draw near her own—the only one to whom she could say : " I carry your life in my bosom. The only one whose features reminded her of Alonso, now that she had lost Isabel. She had nearly fainted and the hermit was sprinkling her forehead with fresh water which he took from the well-pool with a sprig of thyme. " Father, we have lost my mother, your daughter. Do you think we will also lose . . . She did not dare end the question and cried out : " I am so lonely ! " He made her sit down by him, took her hand in his and said : " I know what torments you. It is very much in my mind. If he does not come back soon, you will have to struggle for him. I gave him weapons for his fight. He will easily win. But the Inquisition is a dangerous thing. Its trunk is sound, but some of its branches are rotten." She was not sure she had understood. " Father, I know so little about this country ! It is so different from mine ! And there is little I can do by myself." And he replied : " I will advise you. Come and see me now and then. But if by any mishap—I am old and frail—I were to fail you, remember this : go and see the Bishop of Córdoba. He is an uncle of Alonso. His name is the same : Alonso Manrique. He is a fine scholar and an honest man. And he is very powerful. So powerful that he is spoken of as the next Inquisitor General. He will help you."

She kissed his hand. She remained there by him, saying nothing, or relating to him stories of Mexico and how she had loved Alonso before she had met him, and how her soul had felt like a morning and a dew, when he had come and brought Christ to her, grown up as she had in the bosom of a grim religion. " Yes," he commented, " that was the gift of Jesus Christ. He brought love to men. How difficult men find it to love ! See how in the name of love they are now tormenting you ! Yet love must win." He took her hand and led her to the tiny chapel of his hermitage. There, at the feet of the Virgin and Child, the old rabbi and the young Aztec, bound together by two generations of Spanish love, prayed that love might save the living bridge which united them.

"How is my mother?" was the first question which Alonso put to Suárez when the old steward was admitted into his cell. It was a comfortable room with a clean well-appointed bed and plenty of air and light. "Sir, my lady Doña Isabel was set free by the Holy Office about the time you were imprisoned. I came to fetch her, as you neither wrote nor returned. My lady was not admitted to see you. She returned with me. She was in very poor health indeed. . . ." Suárez cast his eyes on the ground and said no more.

Alonso struggled to remain outwardly serene. Suárez felt that it might help if he went on giving him some of the details which, in the opinion of the loyal steward, had better be kept secret: the rose, the Crucifix. . . . Alonso had had leisure to meditate on the mysterious ghost who had put the Moorish box into his hands, and he had found no difficulty in striking the right solution. When he heard the details about his mother's death, his conviction was settled: the old rabbi had come to see his daughter and had assisted her in her last hours. He felt deeply comforted at this thought. He was sure the rabbi was by now a Christian and even a monk. He suspected he might be the hermit. He kept all these surmises and certainties for himself.

"As for your own case," said Suárez, "I have some news which I gathered at the inn. Ever since my lady's difficulties with the Inquisition began I have made a point of staying in Seville at an inn I discovered close to the Esquivels, just to pick up news. And this is my news: both old and young Esquivel are here . . . in jail also." Alonso guessed that the Moorish box was beginning to work wonders. "It seems," Suárez went on, "that the Holy Office has come across a lot of papers and that they are finding out now whether they are genuine or forgeries, and meanwhile they keep father and son in jail. It may last long. It probably will, I mean your case, for your cousin in Torremala is powerful and he will see to it that it lasts long."

"How is Xuchitl?" asked Alonso. "My lady Doña Suchil is of course very sad. The death of Doña Isabel was a terrible blow." These words, natural though they were, raised Alonso's impatience to an unbearable pitch. He was above all an active man and longed to be free again. What irked him about the episode was its irrelevancy. "Suárez," he said at last, "You have all the money we need now. If more is needed, you will find a box of gold coins and a box of jewels hidden under the third tombstone by the well. But that is only in case of extremity. For the present, the cane-stick should do. Return to Torremala and tell Xuchitl that as soon as she can she is to come and see me either with you or with your son."

7

His Eminence Don Alonso Manrique, Bishop of Córdoba, was at his desk one sunny morning in the autumn of 1521. The room was flooded with light which the tall chestnut trees in the garden made green and cool; and beyond this first line of chestnuts, Don Alonso saw rows and rows of orange trees, small firmaments of deep green constellated with red suns of their own. He was tall and elegant, but in his ripe age, as a man who looked about fifty, nothing but a certain mellow worldliness remained of the masculine charm that had made of him one of the most successful young bloods of Spain before he had taken Holy Orders. In his youth he had taken sides for Philip the Handsome (Charles V.'s father) against old Ferdinand the Catholic and, after Philip's death, had sought refuge in Flanders, where he had stood up as a champion of the Jews and a strong advocate of enlightenment in the Church. He was a keen scholar and a virtuous prelate, even though too modest to make any claims to holiness.

While he looked at the garden, his secretary, a young priest with keen intelligent eyes, was opening seals, unfolding papers and classifying them on the table after a rapid glance at their contents. "Oh!" he cried out. "A letter from Erasmus!" This was exciting news, for the Dutch scholar had many admirers amongst the learned and progressive members of the Spanish clergy. The Bishop turned round sharply: "Where?" The priest handed him the letter but he returned it to his secretary after reading the signature: "Read it to me."

"Dear friend: Thou must have heard about my latest tribulations. My enemies have now discovered a new line of attack. They accuse me of being the inspirer of that coarse monk of Saxony, Luther, and of the grievous errors which his otherwise well-meaning zeal for reform leads him to commit. In my sorrow, I turn for comfort to such enlightened friends as thou. The Court is in mourning over the death of the Supreme Pontiff. The general rumour has already appointed his successor: Adrian, the Dutchman, my countryman, who is now in your country as Inquisitor General. If that were so, I pray the Lord He may illumine Cæsar to appoint thee to lead the Inquisition. For we stand in need of light at the top. . . ."

The young secretary looked up and said: "Sir, this idea of the Dutchman is excellent indeed. But I doubt whether the monks would like it. They know you read Erasmus. . . ." The prelate smiled indulgently: "Not all the monks are against Erasmus. In fact, the best monks are his friends. . . . It is a matter of scholarship and mental power." "And of soap!" contemptuously added the young, elegant priest. "What else?" asked the Bishop. "A letter from your chaplain

in Seville, Father Miguel." The secretary read it : " Had I ever doubted that Your Lordship had me appointed to this post for my sins, I should have found it out again and again every day of our Lord. Your Lordship may well believe me : to be a member of a Tribunal of the Holy Office is, next to Purgatory, the sorest trial a soul can endure. I had promised myself never to trouble Your Lordship with particular cases, yet this one which at present engages our attention must provide an exception to the rule, for the prospective victim is a nephew of Your Lordship's whose name is identical with yours : Don Alonso Manrique. He has done outstanding service to His Majesty in the new lands of the Indies, yet now he is in one of our jails, and if the Lord does not protect him, he will be put to the question and treated in his flesh and bones by us Christians worse than the savage Indians ever did. Your Lordship may wish to avoid that the name of Alonso Manrique should be dragged too long among those of witches and obdurate Jews. Your Lordship's obedient servant and chaplain Miguel of the Holy ✠. Is there any truth in the rumour that the Bishop of Tortosa, our Dutch Inquisitor General, is to be the next Pope and Your Lordship the next Inquisitor General ? "

" Rumour flies on the wings of fame ! " said the secretary pointedly. The prelate was concerned over the news which the letter had revealed to him. " That must be the Torremala branch of my family . . . See where my son Rodrigo is now. Try to have him sent to me as soon as possible. I want to send him to Seville to inquire into this business . . . as to that gossip, let it be. . . " He mused for a while, looking at his lovely garden. " The next Pope will be the Dutchman. That is certain."

8

The Tribunal met again three weeks later, for the Inquisition, one of the mills of the Lord, ground slowly. Father Theodore reported that the Esquivel documents had been thoroughly examined by experts but that no unanimous conclusion had been reached. He therefore suggested that Alonso should be questioned as to the origin of the papers. This was done and Alonso was brought in. After the usual oaths and prayers, Father Theodore asked him to state how the papers had come into his possession. " I want to explain to you," added the monk, " that you are not here to-day as an accused man in your own case, but as a witness in the case of the person to whom these papers refer."

Alonso then told them how the Moorish box had been brought to his attention by an old man who had disappeared from sight as he stooped to pick it up. The Tribunal was astounded. " What is your own explanation of this fact ? " he was asked. He was not yet ready to

be candid about it. "I have none. Some person knowing the house and garden better than I do—and I have never lived there before—some person having also a charitable interest in my mother's case may have——" Father Theodore cut in : "What has your mother's case to do with this ?" He did not want to admit that an attack on Esquivel was a defence of the Manriques, since that would reveal the origin of the accusation against the Manriques, a point on which the Inquisition was adamant ; secrecy had to be kept as to accusers in order to prevent reprisals. Alonso, however, was quick-witted : "I surmise that the person, whoever he was, knew Torremala well. No one with a long acquaintance with Torremala could fail to know that our only enemies are the Esquivels. And therefore, such a person would naturally think that papers compromising Esquivel would almost certainly help my mother." The Tribunal kept silence for a while. Father Theodore asked : "And who could that person be ?" This time Alonso was no less quick-witted : "There, I am on difficult ground. For my mother was universally loved in Torremala owing to her Christian charity."

Father Theodore bit his lips. "Were these papers in the Moorish box ?" he asked. "No. The Moorish box contained a letter addressed to my mother by a man she had never met, who died many years ago, and in which he offered her this help for the time it might be necessary." This was a second shock for the Tribunal. "I see !" pointed out Father Theodore with some intention. "This shows some foresight ! And his name ?" Visibly embarrassed, Alonso answered : "He was a miser known as Isaac Avel." This was a third shock for the Tribunal. Father Theodore glanced round his colleagues with a look of triumph in his eyes. "I believe Your Paternities will agree with me that we must have a discussion by ourselves on these revelations."

Alonso withdrew and Father Theodore at once explained that in his view the whole story was a tissue of nonsensical tales. "Do Your Paternities believe in all these anonymous apparitions, ghosts and old men coming out of their tombs to help this family ? This man is hiding something and I propose that we put him to the question." Father Miguel saw that he would be left alone if he tried to resist. The impression of Alonso's story had been frankly bad, he was moreover a vigorous man. Father Miguel preferred to reserve his own forces for more pitiable cases and bowed to the inevitable. The Tribunal in a body moved to the torture chamber. Alonso was summoned and tied to the wheel.

When an hour later, Alonso with the help of two friars limped back to his bed, Father Miguel said to Father Theodore : "I tell you I never believed this wheel was any use in the case of an honest and healthy man." Father Theodore did not answer.

Rodrigo Manrique, Don Alonso's son, who was one of his chaplains, was busy for a week in Seville and for another week in Torremala on a thorough inquiry into the case. When he returned to Córdoba, his mind was clear. "Father," he said to the Bishop, "the only crime of the Manriques is that our other cousin, Manrique de Lara, finds Torremala excellent for hunting the boar. It really is, as a matter of fact. Do you happen to know of another estate with similar amenities?" The prelate laughed, then turned grave again and said reflectively: "Can human nature be so mean? Have you seen him, Manrique de Lara, I mean?" Rodrigo answered: "Yes. I saw him. He says he is determined to keep Alonso in the jails of the Inquisition till he gets tired of the game and of Torremala. 'Why should he bother about this little place when he has half of Mexico at his disposal?' that is his argument. You would think Alonso had conquered Mexico in order that Manrique de Lara should keep Torremala! In many other ways, the case is most picturesque and has already produced a crop of legends. The whole of Torremala is convinced that Isabel Manrique died like a saint: that when she died, a Crucifix which everybody had seen on the wall opposite her bed, was found between her hands, having moved there of its own accord, and that a white rose grew out of the bed-clothes over her feet. A strong scent of roses filled the room."

"But she was the Jewess in the family, was she not?" asked the future Inquisitor General, the friend of Erasmus. "Yes. The Jewess. But the whole place is convinced of her sanctity. I have been able to trace the stories about her death to their source. I had no difficulty in discovering that a local hermit had just come from Flanders. 'Aha!' I thought at once. 'That is a converted Jew!' Do you remember," Rodrigo Manrique asked his father, the Bishop, "the kind of person we used to see during our exile in Flanders? I went to see him. I recognised the type at once. A marvellous tale. There was an old monk in Louvain, you know, the man with the long white beard, who used to teach you Hebrew?" The Bishop answered: "Father Augustine?" "Yes. Father Augustine. Very well. He had been the rabbi of Torremala till the expulsion. And he is therefore Alonso Manrique's grandfather." The Bishop crossed himself: "The Lord be blessed!" And his son went on: "I had a long talk with him. He told me the whole story. I need not go into details. He used to visit his daughter's house, the very house in which he had lived as a rabbi, in the hope of delivering to her a box which Father Guzmán, the Prior of the Moor's Hill, had received for her from Don Rodrigo's own hands

years ago. This box had come back to him when the Prior died. In the end, Father Augustine was able to give it to Alonso. Thanks to this box, Esquivel is now proved to be an obdurate Jew who had tried all his life to hide the fact by persecuting his brethren. The Tribunal had to prosecute Alonso because he had in his possession a jewel which is credited with magical powers to excite lust. Here it is. Young Esquivel had another one which is *not* endowed with such powers. Here it is. Father Miguel put on one and Father Theodore the other and they had a curious experience. Father Miguel slept peacefully with the magic jewel and Father Theodore had a terrible night fighting with temptation, though his jewel was not magic."

The Bishop and his son laughed heartily. Then Rodrigo added : "They have tortured Alonso." They were silent for a while, ashamed. "I have seen his wife," added Rodrigo. "What is she like?" asked the Bishop. "Not my type!" answered the young cleric flippantly, and he added : "But she struck me as most enlightened and well-read. An admirable talker, though in a language so different from her own. She is of course, very lonely. She seemed happy to talk with a human being on her level. She is longing to see him free."

The prelate was thinking matters over, sitting at some distance from his desk, playing absently with the two hearts of jade on his table. "See. Ask Alonso and his wife to come and stay with me here. Write to Manrique de Lara to get out of Torremala within a month and, as a compensation, offer him the Valley of Three-Bridges—" "Would you?" cut in his son. "Yes. I meant to get rid of it anyhow. He has had his eyes on it for long, I know. And we never have time to go near the place ourselves. As for this stone . . . which is it? The bigger of the two, isn't it . . . Send it . . . Send both to a jeweller and ask him to incise on them the image of Our Lady with the Infant God in her arms. That should make them both clean from heresies and witchcraft."

After several weeks of hospitality in the palace of the Bishop of Córdoba, Xuchitl had not recovered yet from the wonder into which her new surroundings had thrown her. The old rabbi's house in Torremala was all she had known of Spanish life till one day, after a rapid glimpse at Seville—a revelation in itself—she had arrived in Córdoba with her husband and entered the sumptuous hall of Don Alonso Manrique, the Bishop. The prelate in person, with his secretary and his son, had come down to receive them. "My nephew, welcome to your own house. My lady, no, I will kiss your hand, not your mine.

She was still too tender from her recent sufferings and very nearly burst into tears. They were taken upstairs to their apartments. Xuchitl, and even Alonso, whose experience of his own country was not much wider, were struck by the masterly balance between sobriety and luxury which could be seen in every detail. The house gave the impression of both abundance and bareness, comfort and austerity. Black or dark wood, in stark contrast with plain whitewashed walls—here and there, and always in the right place, a picture or a bronze, not always of a religious subject. Space, air, light and the ever present aroma of orange, both in blossom and in fruit; books, many and beautifully bound. Xuchitl remembered the impression of that blessed day when she had at last felt at rest from her anxiety. Alonso was still convalescing from the injuries of the torturing wheel.

"I find some difficulty in disentangling it all," she said to him as he lay on an easy-chair in the garden. "How can a man such as this and a system such as that (she meant the Inquisition) live together? When I remember our priests and their terrible smell and their sanguinary ways and I compare them with this prince of the Church, so elegant in mind and body, I might think I had died and was reborn in another world. But when I think that these priests of the same Church as this prelate have tortured you! . . ." That was precisely his mental torture at the time. He had made up his mind, while in Mexico, that the land had to be conquered politically first and converted afterwards from the top. Here he could see, he could indeed feel in his bones, the effects of conversion from the top. He knew, better than Xuchitl could guess, how accidental the intervention of Bishop Manrique had been. People spoke of him as the coming Inquisitor General. If so, the world would see a curious sight: a keen, lovable, free mind at the head of the Institution for religious conversion from the top. Could the "accident" be attributed to God's specific desires? Was there anything that God did not do? Or could it be said: "*De minimis non curat Deus?*" as he was beginning to suspect.

A servant came to inform them that they were to dress especially for dinner, for his Lordship was that evening celebrating the election of the new Pope. Xuchitl was most elated. She had not seen a fête in Spain yet. The halls of the Bishop's house made an admirable setting for the purpose. The lofty ceilings, the straight lines of the tall door-windows, covered by long, noble curtains of red damask, the candelabra in which hundreds of wax candles were burning, the bronze and marble statues, the tapestries which enlivened the walls with their pageantry made a fitting background for the crowd of colourful personalities gathered that evening in honour of the new Pope, Adrian of Louvain and Utrecht, Bishop of Tortosa, Inquisitor General of Spain.

Xuchitl noticed that in Spain, contrary to what was usual in Mexico, the men, in dark tints and sober hues, made a kind of sombre background to the gorgeous attire, colour and glistening splendour of the ladies. She herself, abundantly provided with jewels, thanks to Isaac Avel, was a striking vision of feminine charm. Her hair, combed the Spanish way, held with a string of pearls, set off her clear-cut forehead. She soon became the centre of attention owing to her exotic origin and looks, and the guests of both sexes took pride in exchanging a few words with the lovely Mexican princess. She was deeply impressed by the tone of austere elegance which gave such marvellous unity to every phase of the entertainment. The dinner was served on long solid oak tables, lit by silver candelabra. The servants were students of a seminary endowed by the Bishop, and were dressed in long, dark red silk cassocks. She found the fare excellent, if somewhat abundant, and the wine delicious. She sat between the Bishop's son, Rodrigo, and a court dignitary sent to Córdoba by the new Pope with greetings and instructions for the prelate. This Court dignitary was a Flemish nobleman of ample girth, rubicund cheeks and heavy blond moustache. "Your Mercy will find it difficult at first to follow our quarrels and differences," said Don Rodrigo to her, "but we have been very happy, my father and I, to be able to intervene in time." "I feel a little lost," she confessed. "Things which are obvious to you, for instance the difference between a Moor, a Jew and a Christian, are still somewhat vague to me." Don Rodrigo smiled: "We realise that. Moreover, as Your Mercy knows, my father is not in sympathy with all this narrow bigotry and he would like to break the barriers which separate Moors from Christians in our towns. As for Erasmus, it is all a matter of the monks——" The Flemish nobleman overheard this remark. "Beware of him," he warned. "I have repeatedly drawn His Majesty's attention to this dangerous man. He means no harm, but once you allow every man to publish everything he wishes on the Scriptures, how can you stop the rot? It is all very well for you to be easy with Erasmus. You are far away from Luther. With us it is another story." And he blew hard and emptied his glass of wine heartily. Xuchitl had only a faint notion of this Erasmus everybody was talking about. She was relieved to see that the Bishop had risen to offer thanks and presently the guests passed on to another hall where a show was going to be presented to them.

There was a stage at the end of the hall, at the foot of which three musicians with string instruments (two very much like guitars and one not unlike a violoncello) were playing in a manner new to her but which she found delightful. The curtain was drawn aside by two pages and she saw a man dressed as a shepherd carrying a ewe on his shoulder. He looked tired and breathed heavily:

Day after day, carrying my lamb,
Through hill and dale, old as I am,
Till I have found the Son of man
Whose hands can heal my ailing lamb.

On goes the shepherd from left to right on the stage. A devil, in full uniform, red tights, horns and a tail, stops him and says :

Walk on no longer, good old man.
Here I am, the Son of man.
I will take care of your little lamb.
Just leave it here . . .

then he turns to his audience, being an explanatory devil, and says :

. . . and its soul I'll damn !

A rumble of the three musical instruments underlined the horror of the situation. Simple though it was, the show had its effect, like all things which actually happen before our eyes. But the old man was not so easily deceived :

The Son of man thou canst hardly be
Where are thy fair companions three ?
Faith, yea, and Hope and Charity ?
How can I believe in thee ?

The devil then hid behind a tree and came out again dressed as a very rich merchant. He offered the old man a sack of gold :

Leave your lamb there, shepherd. You're old.
Two hounds are ambushed in the black wold.
One is called hunger, the other cold.
To calm their fury, give them this gold.

But the shepherd is not shaken in his faith :

Out of my presence ! Your story is old.
For thirty gold coins my Lord was sold.
I fear not hunger, I fear not cold.
Nothing I fear but your master bold.

The devil hides again behind the tree and reappears on the stage as a beautiful damsel :

Leave your lamb there. Shepherd, you're young.
Come and be merry, women among.
All worries vanish with wine and song.
Make your life merry for it is not long !

The faithful shepherd is not tempted either by this dangerous damsel and answers :

Love is my master, but not your love.
Oh wanton maiden, in vain you strove.
Your love and the devil go hand in glove.
My love will come from the One above !

So, one after the other, all the temptations of life were offered and rejected in sturdy, halting, still unsure verses. The audience followed the adventures of the shepherd on the stage as a living image of their own heart-struggles. At last, the victorious shepherd was rewarded. A white curtain at the back was drawn and Xuchitl was thrilled to the marrow when she saw a lovely picture of a woman with a baby in her arms, the familiar picture of the Virgin and Child. The shepherd on the stage fell on his knees, the musicians played a melody of longing and appealing themes, and behind the curtain a chorus of children's voices sang the final song :

Oh lambs and shepherds, here is my sweet love :
My life, my child, my lamb, my dove.
To you I offer Him, for Him to suffer
A death on earth for a life above.

The curtain was not drawn back. The Virgin and Child remained on view and many spectators stayed to pray before it long after the show had been finished. Gradually the guests left the house ; and when at last the family were by themselves, the Bishop came to Xuchitl and put round her neck the hallowed Heart of Jade : " Notice," he said with a paternal smile, " that now it bears the image of the true love."

Xuchitl took the stone in her hands, gave a little cry of surprise, seized the Bishop's hand and kissed it.

II

The solemn high Mass next day in the Cathedral made a profound impression on Xuchitl. She had frequently contrasted the Christian and the Aztec religious services and found the Mass so beautiful as a spectacle and so profound as a spiritual communion that, beside it, the barbaric and sanguinary rites of her ancestors seemed to her hardly human. But she had not yet been present at a high Mass in which all the senses—sight, smell, hearing—were enlisted in the service and to the glory of God by all the arts of a fully developed civilisation. She did not fail to observe the effect produced on the soul by the closed temple as opposed to the open platform on which the human sacrifices were performed by the Aztecs. The closed temple, with its coloured windows, drew the soul inwards, as if the vaulted nave of the church were a deep cavity of the soul's own dwelling, while the altar, on which hundreds of wax candles were burning, was like the luminous faith which gave the soul its warmth and its light. The Bishop himself officiated, assisted by two other high dignitaries of his cathedral. They were clad in long white vestments of airy transparency, over which they wore chasubles sown over with pearls and hemmed with gold. Their movements were dignified and smooth; their voices manly and peaceful; their gestures noble and appealing. Clouds of incense seemed to transfigure their hands into doves rising towards the dark vaults, which were alive with the vibrations and reverberations of the powerful organ, above which again the chorus of maidens and children rose in angelic tones singing the praise of the Lord.

From those heights where the Lord of Light and Love dwelt in eternal serenity, Xuchitl expected the manna of peace, the light of reason, the love of all men to fall like dew on the men and women of both worlds. Her heart went back to her father, Nezahualpilli the precursor. How he would have liked this religious ceremony! No blood. No enmity. No persecution. No torment. Reason with wings, love with serenity. How he would have smiled, happy at last, had he known this religion. What a pity he had not known Christ himself: Christ, born in Palestine of a Jewish mother . . . like Alonso, tortured just as Alonso had been by the envious and the evil-minded, Christ Who had died on the Cross, Who had sacrificed himself to put an end to all human sacrifices! The organ rose in triumph after the symbolic sacrifice of the Mass had been consummated. *Ite, missa est.* The crowd began to file out of the calm, dark church into the turmoil outside. "Anyhow," said a mischievous, worldly, elegant woman, as she dipped her hand in the holy water fount, "if he is to be the next Inquisitor General, he will be a handsome one."

When the two Esquivels were seized by the "Familiars" of the Inquisition, they could hardly believe their eyes. It seemed to them as if the world revealed at last the depth of its iniquity. What ! Had they not played the game with all their skill so as always to remain within the bounds of what was allowed ? Whence could the menace come ? What could be the accusation levelled against them ? As soon as they found themselves facing the Tribunal, their minds were set at rest. It was obvious that behind the questions put to them by the Inquisitors lurked an accusation of secret adherence to the Jewish faith—terrible enough, indeed the most terrible in the eyes of the Holy Office—yet one which they did not fear, convinced as they were after so many years that their success in passing for Christians was complete. Both father and son hotly protested of their faithful loyalty to the law of Christ, and old Esquivel did not fail to point out that in his youth he had even been the scourge of the Jews in Torremala. Oddly enough, the inquisitors did not seem to take this fact as an argument for the defence at all. They had too much experience of the ins and outs of the Jewish question to be taken in by the naïve guile of Esquivel ; and they knew that it was not unusual for unreliable new Christians to hide their disloyalty under undignified attacks against their ex-brethren, the unconverted Jews.

Both father and son were put to the torture. Both held their ground, for they knew full well that if they admitted their guilt no amount of repentance would save old Esquivel at any rate from the stake. The Tribunal took a very serious view of the case. They allowed them a month to recuperate from the effects of the wheel and then had them brought back again for another examination. Hardly had they sat down and sworn anew that they were loyal members of the Christian Church when Father Theodore, his eyes burning with indignation, seized a paper from his desk and handed it to old Esquivel across the table. It was Esquivel's solemn oath in Hebrew to remain for ever loyal to the Synagogue and to raise his children in the law of Moses. Esquivel fell on his knees trembling with terror. Not for a second did he dream of pretending that the document was not true. Taken unawares, he collapsed. The Tribunal made him sign a statement to the effect that he had kept his oath and had remained throughout a secret Jew. He was sentenced to the stake.

Frowning hard, struggling to keep his countenance and to prepare a defence, Vicente awaited his turn. He argued that he knew nothing about the document and the promise of his father's and that his father had brought him up as a Christian, which was not the case, for, though

he had been christened and ostensibly educated by Christian teachers, Vicente, as well as his sister, had received Jewish tuition at home where the Jewish rites were secretly kept. The Tribunal adjourned his case and decided to arrest Marta.

When Marta found herself in jail, her humiliation and fury knew no bounds. At the first opportunity, she denounced the *Licenciate* García. She told the Tribunal that she was his mistress and that he had kept her throughout informed of the proceedings which interested her. García was accordingly also arrested.

13

One sunny morning, a brilliant squadron of knights riding Córdoba horses, perhaps then the finest horses in the world, passed through the streets of Córdoba, preceded by a band of trumpets, drums and flageolets and followed by a troupe of infantry from the royal Alcazar. They passed by the Bishop's palace, the Cathedral, Silversmiths Street and Fair Street, and so arrived at the Town Hall where they solemnly invited the "Twenty-fours," Gentlemen-Aldermen of the City, to the solemn *Auto de Fe* which was to be held a few days later. After a courteous speech of thanks by one of the "Twenty-fours" who spoke for the Council, the Chief Constable of the Inquisition followed by his brilliant suite reappeared at the main door of the Town Hall. A roll of the drum was heard and the crier read aloud to the crowd: "Be it known to you, neighbours and residents of the City of Córdoba, that the Apostolic Inquisitors thereof are about to hold a public Act of Faith in Christ, in exaltation of His Holy Catholic Faith and in order to extirpate heresy, to take place on Monday, May the third of this present year. And the graces and indulgences granted by the Supreme Pontiffs shall be accorded to all those who will be present at the said act."

A huge amphitheatre covered by an awning had been built on the square. Its chief features were an altar for the Crucifix; a platform for the tribunal of the Holy Office, the chief authorities of the town and the Church dignitaries; the "half-orange" or semi-circular enclosure for the accused, the reddish-yellow of whose penitential dresses gave its picturesque name to the place; and tiers upon tiers of seats for thousands of eager spectators. On the eve of the Act of Faith, at nine o'clock in the morning, the Cross of the Holy Office, a green Cross on a silver pedestal, was covered with a black veil to mark the grief of the Church for the spiritual death of her children. In the afternoon, the procession of the Holy Cross began at three o'clock. A squadron of soldiers brilliantly clad opened the way. After them came the crimson

standard of the Holy Office borne by the Chief Constable, a nobleman escorted by all the nobility of the city. Long files of friars of many orders and colours followed, each with a thick wax taper burning in the light of day. There followed the members of the Confraternities of St. Bartholomew and of the Charity of Jesus Christ, carefully alternated, because each of the two confraternities claimed precedence over the other and they would not have yielded one inch of their rights even at the gates of Heaven, let alone in the procession of the Holy Office ; and after them, the Brothers of the Confraternity of St. Peter Martyr, more than five hundred, all of them officials of the Inquisition, amongst whom would have marched the Licenciado García wearing on his chest the black and white Cross of the Order had he not been in jail waiting to march the next day in the melancholy troop of the penitent. A soft, well-tempered music was heard. Three rows of friars, high officials of the Tribunal, preceded the chapel of the Cathedral who came singing the hymn *Vexilla Regis*, in honour of the Holy Cross which was borne after them, tall and green, plainly visible through the transparent black veil which covered it, balanced aloft on the shoulders of four Dominican friars, under a high pallium, the six silver staffs of which fell evenly on the pavement, impressing upon the cobbles at every step the vigour and the conviction of the six robust monks who handled them. Not till nine o'clock in the evening did the Green Cross reach its appointed place in the amphitheatre, the altar set facing the Tribunal, covered with purple brocade and adorned and illumined with rows of tall silver candlesticks. By then thousands of wax-tapers were burning in the amphitheatre and the whole place had acquired a tense, hot, mystical, ardent atmosphere. The light of the altar fell on the crimson velvet of the benches of the Tribunal opposite and shone on the gold of the royal arms, on the Olive branch and the Sword, symbols of the Inquisition which could be seen on the dais, across which the ardent light of the thousand candles seemed to transfigure into letters of flame the golden letters of the motto of the Holy Office writ large over the red damask : *EXURGE DOMINE JUDICA CAUSAM TUAM*. To the right and left the crimson velvet of the benches reserved respectively for the Chapter of the Cathedral and for the Chapter of the Town Council, shone against a rich background of Flemish tapestries crossed by the darker line of chairs of Muscovite leather reserved for the lower officers. But so far the stage was empty. The crowd of worshippers which had arrived with the procession was gradually melting away to gather forces for the strain of the morrow, and only a few hundreds of devout laymen and monks remained the whole night singing hymns of praise to the Holy Cross which kept Spain free from heretics.

14

The great Monday shone at last. The procession of the accused, a dismal sight, left the royal Alcazar at six in the morning. It was opened by the Parish Cross, also under a black veil ; then between a double file of soldiers with halberds and preceded by the Alcaide or Governor of the Prison, with a golden stick, and by his assistant, with a silver stick, came four "Familiars" of the Holy Office carrying two coffers covered with red velvet and garnished with golden corners and locks ; they contained the proceedings referring to the accused, the melancholy troop of whom followed, guarded by soldiers and exhorted by monks. All the accused, men and women, had in their right hand an unlit wax taper, a symbol of their extinct faith ; and a rope round the neck, with one knot for every hundred strokes of the whip in their sentence. The three first, two men and a woman, were in the procession for bigamy. They wore on their heads the *coroza*, a pointed hood of pasteboard painted in different colours, but did not wear the holy sack, which was reserved for those whose offences, delving deeper than mere morals, touched the core of the faith. Four witches marched behind them : two of them still young, one an old woman and another one a skinny skeleton who looked—and was—one hundred years old. They wore on their heads very tall yellow *corozas* seething with red devils, and each of them carried a broom and a cauldron, the official insignia of their profession. Between the witches and the heretics, alone, dejected and sad, walked a man whom very few of his one-time friends would have recognised as the Licenciado García. Over his pale lips his moustache, no longer waxed nor painted, drooped dispirited and dishevelled, and, like his hair, unaided by black artifice, had returned, oh shame ! to its grey nature. He shed tears of shame and his trembling fingers quivered up and down the rope which hung from his wiry neck, as if counting the knots which symbolised the three hundred strokes of the birch to which he had been sentenced, not to speak of the loss of his post, of his fortune and of ten years of his liberty. Behind the disloyal clerk of the Inquisition, there came a long procession of the "penitent," nine of them, and of the "reconciled," forty-two men and women. They wore the holy-sack made of yellow cloth, with the red Cross of St. Andrew on it. They were persons who had realised their sin in pretending to be Christians while they were secret adherents of Jewry. All carried long, thick wax-tapers, unlit, to symbolise the dark state of their souls. Twenty effigies followed, the first nineteen representing persons who had been reconciled but had since then relapsed into Jewish practices and were dead or at large. These effigies wore the

linen holy-sack decorated with red flames. Two boxes were conveyed behind two of the statues. They contained the bones of the persons concerned, to be burnt by the secular authorities along with the effigies. The twentieth effigy was that of a reconciled person who could not be found and the effigy therefore wore the woollen holy-sack. The accused sentenced to death formed the rearguard of the procession. There were three women and two men, each between two monks who prepared them to die. They wore the holy sack of linen, red flames on a yellow background and a fire-coloured *coroza* ; and in their hands all but the last man carried a green wooden Cross with the image of Jesus Christ painted on it. The first four had reconciled themselves with the Church, but as they had relapsed already from a previous reconciliation, they could not be reprieved and had to perish. As for the last man, he would not abjure his faith. He had refused the Crucifix and was ready to die.

Xuchitl and Alonso had taken their seats on a special tribune set aside for the Bishop's family. The Bishop himself had his seat on the platform. As the reconciled were filing in and taking their seats in the half orange, Xuchitl who was holding Alonso's hand, tense with excitement at the strange, dramatic sight, felt his hand jerk, then shake, then lie at rest. "What is it?" she asked. "Do you see the second man coming up the steps now with a holy-sack on?" he asked in answer to her question and she cried out, "Esquivel!" And he, with a husky voice: "The woman behind him is his sister." Alonso was gloomy. He was thinking of old Esquivel. Where would he be? His eyes scrutinised every new arrival, as he or she appeared under the little gate at the foot of the stairs which led up to the half orange. At last, but not till the very last, old Esquivel appeared. He was the unreconciled, the obdurate! Alonso knew what it meant. Esquivel would be burnt alive.

The vast amphitheatre was crowded with notable and influential persons. The multitude outside were eager to see what was going on, and though many had managed to steal in, most of them had to be content with hearing the murmuring and the singing and imagining the rest. The mass had begun before the last of the sentenced had arrived. After the mass there was a sermon, then the "Secretaries of the Secret," alternating in the two pulpits on either side of the Tribunal, read the chief papers of each case and the sentence. It was noticed that the first cases read were those of the accused who had been sentenced to death. The news spread like wild-fire, sparks of which soon inflamed the multitude outside. "To the Marruvial!" cried men, women and urchins everywhere, and in a wild race the crowd outside ran to the suburbs, towards the Plasencia-Gate, just outside which the seven stakes erected for the sentenced were ready. The going was good. The

crowd settled down to wait. It was twelve o'clock. The sun was broiling.

15

Meanwhile the grave ecclesiastics and noblemen present at the Act of Faith went on patiently listening to the Secretaries of the Secret who read the verbose papers in which the heinous crimes of the six doomed persons were elaborately told. At four o'clock, the six persons sentenced to death left the half-orange under the guidance of friars and in the custody of sergeants. A number of ecclesiastics and noblemen who held official duties in the city or in the Inquisition left the amphitheatre and the six condemned persons were officially delivered to the State authorities represented by the Alcade Mayor of the city.

They were taken to the spot outside the Plasencia-Gate. There was a clamour as the crowd saw them arrive. The friars confessed the five reconciled ones. The executioner began by burning the effigies, tying them to one of the stakes to which he set fire. Two friars were hard at work on old Esquivel, imploring him to save his soul even at the very last hour. The Captain General of the King's forces, a scion of one of the noblest families of Andalucia was present. He took a Crucifix in his hand and went to Esquivel who stood, fierce and resolute, at the foot of the stake, on top of the heap of wood which was to consume his body, *no matter what he said or did*. The Captain General said with a voice broken with emotion : " Brother, you are as good as dead. Your body counts no longer, Think only of your soul. Save it in Christ Who opens his arms to you," and he showed him the Crucifix with an insistent gesture. But Esquivel, conscious of the heavy load he carried, was thinking of nothing but saving his soul by loyalty to .A. the Unmentionable whose faithful he had so often persecuted in life. He gave no answer to the noble marquess and muttered inwardly the prayers in Judeo-Spanish which his mother had taught him in his childhood : "*Nuestro Dio y Dio de nuestros padres perdona a nuestros pecados en día de las perdonanças este. Y es dicho : Deshice como espesura tus rebellos y como nuve tus pecados ; torna a mí que te redemí.*"

The executioner had meanwhile strangled the other four " relapsos " and after tying their bodies to the four stakes, had set fire to them. The sight of the flames consuming the bodies of the other victims did not weaken Esquivel's firmness. His fear of Jehovah was stronger than any worldly consideration. The executioner drew the flames close to Esquivel three or four times to induce him to repent, for then he would have been entitled to die strangled before being burnt, but Esquivel held out, mentally repeating his old orisons in Judeo-Spanish : "*Otorgantes nos a tí que tu el .A. nuestro Dio, y Dio de nuestros*

padres para siempre y siempre fuente de nuestra vida y amparo de nuestra salvación . . . Bendito tu .A. el bueno tu nombre y a Ti conviene de loar . . .”

The Alcade Mayor exchanged a glance with the friar and then beckoned the executioner. The fire suddenly surrounded the obdurate anti-Jewish Jew. Esquivel disappeared behind the flames and the smoke.

16

The grave lords and ladies and dignitaries were still listening to the secretaries of the Secret who read case after case. Towards seven o'clock in the evening, the tedious reading was over. The half-orange was emptied and the accused were brought up to the chief platform where each was made to kneel, to listen to his formal condemnation by the Church and to read the formal abjuration of his errors. Alonso and Xuchitl heard with emotion Vicente and Marta Esquivel abjure their errors against the faith and confess their slanderous accusations against the innocent. Their emotion was deeper still when they saw the priest just after the Esquivels had spoken, re-light the tapers in their hands to symbolise their return to the light of the Church. When this part of the ceremony was over, the chapel of musicians and singers sang the *Veni creator spiritus*. The audience who had sat there patiently since eleven in the morning was stirred by the strains of this magnificent anthem, but even more when the long, deep lament of the *Miserere* was sung afterwards. It was night when the ceremony ended.

Xuchitl took Alonso's arm to return to the Bishop's palace. She was exhausted. She opened her bedroom window and went out on to the terrace. A scent of orange blossom embalmed the air. Beyond the orange grove a row of cypress trees rose blacker than the black night. And still farther, far away, a column of smoke rose in the still air and floated idly on the sky. "Alonso, look, something is burning beyond the Plasencia-Gate!" He did not answer. She kept silent for a moment, then said: "It reminds me of the festivities of the month of Xocotlvetzi, when we burn so many people that the air is black with smoke."

When Alonso and Xuchitl arrived in Torremala they were able to go directly to the manor. Manrique de Lara had disappeared. Suárez had taken charge and everything was ready to receive the legitimate lord of the place. Alonso showed Xuchitl all the rooms and corners of the house and grounds hallowed by the memories of his youth. He sat at his father's desk and hardly had he done so when Suárez appeared with the cane-stick full of gold coins which he had left in the steward's hands. Alonso remembered how his father had found out the secret of those sticks in that very room, and blushed again. Suárez came back with the gold and jewel boxes of Isaac. Alonso was now at ease about material needs. Torremala gave a good yield. And he felt certain that Mexico would bring in even bigger revenues. He settled down to govern his Spanish domain.

In the summer Xuchitl gave birth to a boy. They named him Rodrigo, the most illustrious military name in the family. They might just as well have named him Nezawal Pilli and it would have better fitted the looks of the newcomer in the Manrique family. Alonso went to tell the news to his grandfather, the hermit.

"This is the fourth generation. The Lord has taken away the second before the first," said the ex-rabbi. "I pray He may soon take me." Alonso asked him: "Are you so tired of living?" The old man glanced at him for a while. "I am not tired. But I am no longer——" He cut short, as if he had changed the direction of his mind. "You see, I was going to utter a blasphemy, as we so often do. We think we know. I was going to say that I was no longer useful. How do I know? I do not know whether I am useful or not . . . nor even whether the Lord has any use for useful people." Alonso listened intently. The old man was touching his own meditations on the raw. "I know nothing more impious than to take upon ourselves to do the work of the Lord. Whoever thinks he is working for the Lord is a blasphemous man. Let him hope that he is working for the Lord; let him do his best, by emptying his work of all self-seeking, to deserve to work for the Lord. But the work of the Lord is unknowable." Alonso's eyes had grown wider and wider. "Father, what a paralysing thought!" The old man, who was looking down, raised his eyes to look Alonso in the face. "Why? If it ever paralyses evil-doers, so much to the good. The work of good people will proceed. Only, they would be less overbearing if they were never sure of being the chosen instruments of God. And that would be to the good also."

Alonso suddenly asked: "Should we have conquered Mexico?"

The old man smiled with just a faint trace of mischievousness : " I will tell you three hundred years hence when I see what you have done with it. . . . " Then he added : " But even then you must not take my opinion as that of the Lord ! " There was a pause, and then the old man asked : " What are you going to do with your son ? " " I don't know yet. What do you advise ? " The old man answered : " Go back to Mexico with him. There are millions of Spaniards, but only you, people like you, can build a Christian Mexico. " After a brief silence Alonso said : " That is Xuchitl's opinion also. " " When are you having him baptised ? " asked the hermit. " Next Sunday, at five. At Moor's Hill, where I first saw Xuchitl in a dream as a mother holding him in her arms. " Alonso told his grandfather the story of that dream. " On Sunday at five I shall be with you from my retirement here. I will strike my bell three times to let you know. You can hear it perfectly from the Monastery. "

Alonso went down the narrow path back to the manor. At the last bend he saw the hermit looking at him with smiling eyes, his frail silhouette cut out on the background of the blue sky. He waved him farewell and walked on. A shoulder of earth covered the old man's figure and Alonso saw him no more.

18

The following Sunday little Rodrigo was christened at Moor's Hill. Father Frederick was now the Prior. He sat at the organ and played anthem after anthem to celebrate the birth of the little Spanish-Mexican lord. Xuchitl had insisted on coming, though it was against the custom. She was radiant with happiness. The church was full of flowers. The whole population of Torremala, most of them out of curiosity, but many also out of sympathy and affection for the Manriques, had walked all the way in the hot afternoon and filled the church with a merry, good-humoured crowd. Following a time-honoured custom, Alonso threw handfuls of coppers to the crowd of children after the ceremony.

As he was enjoying this phase of the proceedings and watching the races which the youngsters fought for his farthings, a thought shot through his heart. The hermit's bell had not been heard. Xuchitl with her baby, the friends, the Prior were having a collation in the refectory. He slipped out and climbed up the path to the hermitage. He found the hermit in prayer before the altar. " Father, " he said and he touched the old man's shoulder. The body fell forward. He returned sad and brooding and quietly told Father Frederick.

A few months later he made up his mind. Xuchitl was restive. She enjoyed Spain but she longed for Mexico. Deep down in her, unknown to her, she found Spain too soft. She felt the need of a fiercer life in her temperament, even though her mind and the more conscious part of her inner world longed for peace and reason. Little Rodrigo was definitely Mexican in his looks, though in some of his features, such as the shape of his nose and in other subtle ways, he revealed his European blood. Alonso had already begun to break it to Suárez. He meant to leave him as chief steward of the domain during an absence which he felt would have to be long. A letter from Cortés clinched the matter. "Do return and soon. I need you here. We must make a noble country in these parts, for the Lord and for the Emperor. You are one of the men we need. My lady your wife's brothers are unruly and unreliable. She must inherit the lordship of Tetzcuco and you must rule it in her name."

One sunny day in the autumn they left Palos for Mexico. As the coast of Spain vanished and Alonso saw himself surrounded by the sea, he thought of his mother's song. Why was it, was it because he was under the spell of the hermit's words, was it because he had already secured his love while action still remained wide and unknown before him : he inverted the song which his mother used to sing and went on repeating to himself :

Beware of the sea for it is a wide, wide love !

He turned from the water to the cabin where Xuchitl had just finished feeding her baby. She was dreaming, looking just like the Mother and Child of his own vision, with her breast still bare offered to the baby. Little Rodrigo Manrique ha-Levy ben Omar Nezawal Pilli was trying to put into his mouth the Heart of Jade.

THE END

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